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DON'T SWING THE COCKATOO

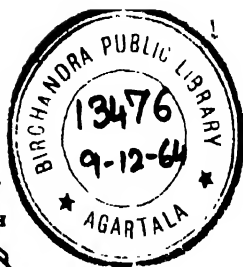
Anne, twenty-seven, a wife and the mother of three children, is a patient in a hospital specializing in serious neurotic cases. Another patient there is Michael. Half African, half European, his experience and suppressed hatred of colour prejudice has caused the occasional paralysis of one side of his body.

In the course of their treatment the two sick people meet and try to help each other. Mike works with Anne to combat her irrational fear of the outside world, and at the same time her companionship and pleasure in his company give Michael just the boost he needs. When, eventually, Anne is allowed to spend a week-end at home she is shocked to realize that her ties with the life at the hospital have grown stronger than she believed possible.

Don't Swing the Cockatoo



KAREN POEL



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I

On the outside, the door of the room showed a number and a little white ticket, which read 'Mrs Anne Lester'.

She looked up and down the corridor before she closed the door and got onto the bed, pressing herself hard up against the headboard, drawing her legs up under her, crushing the pillows in her arms. The pain was there still. It sent tentacle-like probes deep down below her scalp—always searching, worrying, exploring deeper and deeper into whatever lay beneath her scalp—and for weeks now it had never eased. At first she'd prayed for relief, then given up believing in praying, and now there was nothing to her but the pain—and the voices. So that she walked up and down the corridor with its many shut doors and their little white tickets, tugging at her hair to try and get at the pain and root out the voices. And she was very much afraid.

The small room was furnished simply; it was meant to be restful. Close by her, next to the bed, was a wicker tub chair which crackled protestingly when it was sat in—and sometimes when it wasn't, as though someone you couldn't see but perhaps could hear was watching you: 'Why keep on, when really you know you are finished?' The dressing-table held a vase with anemones from Paul, and the radio he'd bought for her: 'They mustn't put you to sleep. That's against the law. But you want to sleep—and never to wake up.' The window curtains were long and narrow, in a pat-

tern with grapes. They bellied inwards with the draught, and the little wooden things at the ends of the cords set up a tapping, cruelly, against the glass: 'The only way to know peace again is to find it for yourself.' Then her travelling clock and a brass ashtray on the mantelpiece, with the 'Get Well' cards, and also a pair of blue and white figures—a boy and a girl. The eyes of the girl fix me under the white hat and the porcelain curls. The mouth is smiling but echoing all the things those other voices are saying. The things the little doctor who came to me at home once said: 'If you go on the way you are you will finish up as one of those creatures we have to look after, but are not allowed to put to sleep. If you were to die tomorrow, who would be any worse off because of it?'

I won't look at her. There's a flower picture over the fireplace. It has the blue delphiniums and the rose with a drop of water on one petal, and sun-daisies—but the daisies are revolving—like the wheels. And they have shading in the middle, with lines like eyes. . . .

Paul and her sister were standing, staring in open horror at her, as she cringed on the floor, pleading with him not to leave her. Almost deranged—so ashamed—so powerless to restore her own dignity.

"Get up."

He went back as though whatever was wrong with her might infect him as well.

She couldn't get up. She could only rock herself backwards and forwards on the floor, her knuckles ground against her teeth to keep her from screaming.

He stood by the window, his hands behind him, holding on to the sill. It was as if he also needed support of some kind.

"You disgust me. You force me to despise you. There's nothing really wrong with you. The doctor's told me so. You're acting—you must be—"

She took her hands from her mouth and held them against her ears to shut out the things he was saying.

"Do you want them to take you away and lock you up?"

"Stop it—"

"Because you're going the right way about it. I won't be responsible for you any longer. Someone else must look after you—"

"Stop it— Stop it, stop it, stop it—"

And when he did stop talking and just stared helplessly at her she said, suddenly cold and very calm:

"If you do go out and leave me now, I'll hate you always."

But he had only been going for half an hour, to do the shopping. And he had gone.

Her sister began then, by trying to reason with her, and taking away the drugs. She watched every move Anne made and said she knew exactly what must be done in this hour of crisis, because their dead father and mother were standing beside her, counselling her. It was when her sister made that remark that Anne finally gave way, and began to scream and scream. . . .

She got off the bed. They had told Paul to destroy all the drugs he could find so there would be no risk of the children getting hold of any. He found what had amounted to hundreds—he'd told her how shocked he'd been to find them—hidden away in cupboards and drawers. But he'd overlooked the one box she kept in her case.

She'd got it out now and was standing in front of the dressing-table, with the shining, blue, smooth, smiling things spilling into her hand. Two or three dropped into the vase with the flowers, and she was frantic while she hunted for and retrieved them, then dried them carefully on her face towel.

She held her wrist with the other hand to steady it, and stared at them.

Through the pain and the voices there's a bell ringing somewhere downstairs. That must be for dinner, but I won't have to go down and face them all, and sit in my chair and find my arms won't bring my hands up from my lap. I'm not going to have to beg Paul when he comes, to stay with me while I have my bath, because the water rushing in and having to take off my clothes frightens me so much. With Paul saying—Nonsense: he isn't going to encourage a woman of twenty-seven to act like a child of three. He says I'm a unit in a family, and one unit mustn't be allowed to disrupt the lives of the other units.

The blue capsules were sliding over and around each other, changing pattern with every movement of her palm. The voices inside her head grew in intensity, urging her on, until they and these tremendously important objects in her hand were the only forces she was aware of, and only the one could be relied upon to cancel out the other.

She would never know how long she stood there, staring down into her cupped hand. Then at last she lifted her eyes from her hand to her face in the mirror beside her, and there seemed to be another, shadowy, face somewhere behind, but nothing mattered any more. And then it was that she shouted out and raised her arm, and with all her strength she flung the capsules so that they showered against the glass and down over the anemones; and herself on the bed, covering her ears with the pillows and rocking herself from side to side. Then someone put their hand on her, and she struggled and shouted more frantically than ever, but the firm touch remained on her shoulder until she was quieter and she saw it was the doctor sitting beside her, waiting calmly. She turned her face away from him and looked towards the figure of the girl on the mantelpiece.

Very quietly, he said:

"You are going to get better. Do you understand what

I'm saying? You are going to get quite well again, and one day you will be able to look at a whole bottle of sodium amytol, and it won't disturb you at all.

"I want you to listen very carefully. You won't believe what I'm saying now, but later on you'll know I'm speaking the truth when I say you will get better.

"You did have a breakdown—a complete physical and emotional breakdown—before you came to this nursing-home. The causes could have been determined and rest and change alone might have cured it, if it had been recognized and treated in time. But now you've taken far too many drugs—more in one day than we allow anyone here to take in one week—and it's been going on a long time. And drugs of that nature can completely change one's whole personality."

He poured water into her glass and took two white pills from a phial he had with him.

"I want you to understand that, and to realize that this is what has happened to you—and it will help you. You know you've ceased to be 'you', and it's all hideous and abnormal; and you're struggling to get back, and you can't—yet. It's going to take time, perhaps quite a long time, and this isn't the place for you to get better. But it will come. Drink this now."

She obeyed him, passively. He got up from where he'd been sitting beside her on the bed and went away, looking back from the door to say:

"I promise you—it will come with time."

Completely submissive, she let them do what they would with her. Nursing-homes were out of the question for treatment which must be lengthy, so they got her a place in a hospital on the outskirts of a village in Berkshire. They were very careful to explain how beautiful the countryside around was, and were at pains to point out that it was in no sense to be termed a mental home—but a centre for the treatment of neuroses and nervous disorders. That she

had perfect freedom of choice about how long she stayed there. That she could leave at a moment's notice when she wanted to.

She was past caring. It was confusion. They gave her drugs to help her make the journey. She remembered nothing at all of her arrival, except the grey leather chair in which her body slumped, the tight yellow curls of the receiving nurse who was talking to Paul, and sitting opposite, a very young fair girl, heavily pregnant, who was crying.

It could have been an end-of-term party. Gusts of giggles, quickly controlled outbursts of hearty laughter; Martha (the eldest in the ward and in middle age) having to weave her way between four jiving girls, as she came along the space between the double row of eleven beds each side, all with an occupant. Martha had on her dressing-gown with her pyjamas underneath, and she paused at a bed where Trudy, face downwards, was crying explosively into her pillow.

On the next bed little Joan was sitting upright, eating a banana and reading *True Life Romances* with the print four inches from her nose, and her eyebrows permanently astonished.

"What's the matter with her?"

Little Joan didn't allow her myopic gaze to wander from the magazine.

"Who? Oh—Trudy! She's being discharged tomorrow."

She got back into her tale without wasting any time, and kind-hearted Martha had a few words with Trudy before resuming her passage along the row to a bed at the end, where Anne sat in a yellow bathrobe, hugging her knees and apathetically watching what the others were doing.

Heather was having fun with Peg's falsies again. The rest were loving it, but kept their laughter within bounds in case anyone in authority should hear and come and put a stop to it. Tantalizingly holding them just out of reach of the

giggling, grabbing Peg, she was straddling the bed, and, with a good, wide sweep of her arm, she was able to get the falsies up and over the hot-water rail which ran along under the high ceiling. They dangled palely, looking like two anaemic Chelsea buns, while the girls collapsed on the bed in a flurry of laughter and nightdresses.

Big Joan wriggled the length of the floor in time to the music from Lorna's transistor, flicking up her shortie nightie every now and then to show her buttocks. The soles of her bare feet were thickly coated with red from the floor polish. While she was dancing, someone else was doing something to Big Joan's bed, probably tipping the usual detergent between the sheets. That was a favourite joke and guaranteed to cause lots of hilarity later on. Marie and the fat little one called Pam had their arms round each other's necks as, half-undressed, they sang together something that sounded like 'Sisters'.

It was all very merry. And something like it went on every night during the hour before lights-out, for the majority of the women here were young and high-spirited, getting well, and likely to be discharged quite soon.

Ada, who had the bed next to Anne, was rinsing out a pair of her pants in the hand-basin which was reserved—so it said on the red notice pasted over it—for the use of doctors only. She was a big, blowsy, warm-hearted Cockney, very popular always, and with a very loud voice. She turned round from the basin now with good-natured exasperation.

"Those bloody pigeons up there on the roof all the time— They get on my bleedin' nerves. Joan—you're the tallest. For Gawd's sake throw your slipper up and let's get a few minutes bleedin' peace."

Obligingly Joan collected a whole battery of slippers from beside the beds, still keeping up her dance. They pattered one after the other against the ceiling. The birds, who spent all day from morning to night alighting and taking-

off with their impossibly weighty feet on the roof above, their ceaseless monosyllabic calling always an overtone to what was going on below, retired for a few minutes; but soon came back to carry on where they had left off.

Anne, like most of the others, found the monotony of the noises the pigeons made over their heads, disturbing. But that was as nothing, compared to the real dread with which she anticipated the resumption each morning of another sound. It began usually about four a.m.—a thin, reedy, piping, which established and swelled and multiplied into full strength as each eager throat took it up. Once, at home with Paul and the children, it had been so wonderful a promise of a lovely spring morning. Now it was hateful, because it heralded the arrival of yet another day with no promise of any kind. A period when one had to be awake, fighting the hopelessness and the queer, inexorable conflict which one's mind had somehow got itself into; wrestling with the desolation and the pain, which still wouldn't let go.

She shivered, and took a cigarette from a packet on her locker, offering them to Martha as the older woman arrived to sit on the bed.

"Are you cold then?"

Martha's thin hair was pulled back with painful restraint and rolled up with brown, flexible strips of something. Her wrists were red and bony, and there was no shape under the dressing-gown. Her face was extraordinarily kind and compassionate.

"No—not cold."

It was early April and the central heating hadn't yet been turned off. It made bursts of angry noise, like a rushing express engine, in the pipes behind the beds every quarter of an hour or so.

"I know how you're feeling. It's always the same at first. But—just look at this lot now."

"How long have you been here, Martha?"

"Eighteen months. But don't let that worry you. With most of them it's only about eight or ten. And for a lot of the time they thoroughly enjoy themselves. You see Trudy there, along the row?"

"Why is she crying like that? Because she feels ill?"

"No—not a bit of it. She's crying because she's going home tomorrow!"

"That—can't be, Martha."

"Because she's leaving behind someone she doesn't want to leave. A friend. A man friend. Trudy lives in a council flat in Walworth, she has three children, all under five. Her husband's much older than she is, he's got a stomach, and he never wants to do anything except watch the tele. Here she's had no washing, no thinking up the next meal, no coping with the kids, no pram pushing for nearly a year—and a man friend to make a fuss of her. You see? Of course she doesn't want to go home. You'll find out what I mean after a bit. They're taking you off bed-rest tomorrow, aren't they?"

"I've been told I'm to get dressed and go down to breakfast with you all, and take part in everything—whatever that may mean."

"Be sure to ask me if there's anything you want to know. Each ward has a sort of leader, and I'm it for this one, so I tell the new patients the rules. There aren't many you need to worry about. But you have to be up, with your bed made, by seven a.m. and back in the ward, undressed for the night, by nine o'clock when the night nurse takes over. If you're not, you go down in her report as absent. The report's their gospel. If you so much as hiccup twice they put it down. Once in a while someone does get fed up with everything and disappears. And if their bed's still empty at ten o'clock and they can't be found, the police have to be told to check up on them."

"I understand."

"After breakfast you'll have to come back here and take

your turn at the dusting and polishing in the ward. That doesn't amount to much. Then, at eight in the morning, at one-thirty and at five-thirty in the evening, you have to report to the nurse on duty here for your drugs."

There was a rattling of bottles and a rolling of rubber tyres from outside the door. Everyone heard it, and they all re-acted immediately. The 'ever lovin' sisters' sprang apart, Big Joan dropped her nightie decorously and took a leap into the detergent. Lorna hastily switched off the radio. Ada spun round to lean casually against the forbidden basin, so as to hide her washing.

"It's the nurse with the medicines," Martha said. "Get your cigarette out."

When she came in to them she was a big, blonde woman, bursting with inanity.

"Good evening, girls. Bedtime is near, but never fear, 'cause mother's here."

Anne watched her take up her position half-way along the ward. Why must she always affect this silly, hearty, talking-down to the patients? Perhaps some of them enjoyed and responded to it. Or perhaps it was a form of placation which she felt was necessary and would get in first.

Few of the day nurses seemed prepared to treat one as a sensible adult either. They appeared to have little to do, as all the patients except herself were out of the ward all day long. They kept the black end-rails of the beds in regimental straight lines, and made them as uncomfortable as possible by folding back, at the bottom, a flap of the top sheet and blankets. Unless you were very short, your toes stuck out uncovered, and you had to remake the bottom of the bed after they had gone.

During her first week, when she'd been kept to sleep and rest in bed, she hadn't wanted to talk to anyone, but she'd watched them listlessly. They all had the same well-trained air of wary apprehension—as though they were afraid you

might be going to start something which they wouldn't be able to finish. Sister George—when she'd sat chatting by the bed for a short period each day—had a habit of twisting and re-twisting two short lengths of cord which she seemed to carry around in her pocket all the time. But her black, bird-like eyes would be darting over her whole range of vision, never still, never missing a thing.

Come to think of it, no one did look steadily at you. The doctor, on his rounds, seldom lifted his gaze from his notebook, except to dart an occasional oblique glance at you. Perhaps that was because he recognized that you were at your worst and was compassionate enough to spare you his scrutiny. Because you couldn't possibly ever see in his look what you used to like to see when a man looked at you.

The women were rolling off their beds and crowding round the nurse, holding out their hands like children asking for sweets. Under the general commotion, Ada looked hurriedly round for somewhere to hide her ill-timed washing, knowing that the nurse would take a final inspection and see everyone was in bed before leaving them. In desperation she lifted the lid of the huge metal instrument-sterilizer standing on a table near by, and dropped the pants inside before joining the group.

Anne took the capsule handed to her and concealed it in her pocket, swallowing only the draught of water. They were meant to be taken immediately, but she had found that one capsule could never carry her right through the night, and it was better—a little more bearable—to have the wakeful time at this end. To be able to promise herself some hours of sleep later on, and hope the drug would take her through to miss that early, insistent call back to consciousness.

Bridget rushed in at the last moment. She was an exceptionally tall girl, very gaunt, twenty-one years old. Her hair was wound up in fat rolls over her set, ghastly white mud-

pack, which she would have to go back to the washroom to sponge off. She swallowed her pill with stiff lips and rushed out again.

The nurse gave her five minutes.

"Everyone else in bed now, and Bridget can put out the lights."

She finished ticking off the names in her report.

"That's your lot! Now all be good girls and see just how fast you can get to sleep."

She pushed out with her bottles clinking, as Bridget came running back. Bridget gave them a few minutes to let Ada go across and retrieve her pants and hang them on a pipe near her bed. There was a last minute adjusting of pins and hair-nets, a patting-in of skin cream, a getting out of cups from lockers ready for early morning tea, and then she turned off the main switches.

Someone in the bigger ward next door, where the nurse had her office, began to scream. It wasn't a manic scream, but a hysterical calling, and a sobbing 'Please, please let me go home' when whoever had screamed ran past the door to the head of the stairs. There was a scuffle as the nurse caught up and restrained her.

"Not now, dear, not tonight," they heard her say. "It's far too late and you have to rest. Tomorrow, if you want to go home, we'll see."

"That's Pauline," Bridget said. "She only came in today and she's been crying ever since for her two babies. Poor kid! They'll give her something to make her sleep."

She settled herself in her bed and bit into an apple. The two apples she ate every night was the only food she ever did consume without being made to, which was her reason for being here and why, in spite of her large frame, she weighed just six stone. She had originally come from Killarney, was a thoroughly good sort, and completely tireless. Where she got her terrific energy from no one could say, but she would cheerfully walk five miles on her long,

emaciated legs if it gave her an excuse to miss a meal.

She joked a great deal about everything, even her illness, but you could sense the terror which lay not very far below the surface, for the doctors made no bones about telling her that she could be dead within six months if she continued not to eat.

"I stood for ten minutes today, in front of Brown's window," she would say, "then I went just inside the door. It was real hungry I was feeling, and the day for their home-made apple pie. There it was—sliced up ready on a dish, with the brown juice oozing out, and little bits of apple. And treacle tart right next to it, on the counter. But when the girl came I couldn't make myself ask for the food, so I bought a pound of flour and gave it to Sister. It's real daft I am, for sure."

It was a mental compulsion far, far stronger than any normal appetite, which forbade Bridget to eat. To help her get hungry she had been allowed to take quite a strenuous job in a local factory, and the hospital made her take a hard-boiled egg and a sandwich every day for her lunch. But the restraining force was much too powerful, and she went to great lengths either to lose the egg, or to persuade her fellow workers to take it and the sandwich from her. Then she would watch, miserably empty, as they ate.

She'd been almost a year at the hospital, so knew practically everyone there, and it was usual for her to treat the others to half-an-hour's spicy gossip every night after the lights had gone out.

"You know Gwenda—and the tall, red-headed man she's been going round with so much, with the freckles and a bit of a limp? Yes you do—the one who sewed himself up in the sheet as Julius Ceasar at the dance last week, and the women chased him with the shears—remember? Well, it was her husband himself who turned up today and said he knew all about what was going on, and he wasn't going to stand any more nonsense, and she'd got to pack up and go

home whether she was better or not. Shouting at her in the doctor's office he was—"

A while later, when Bridget had finished her report, Lorna had crunched her last biscuit, Dora's teeth were grinding, Little Joan snoring gently and the sleeping pills taking effect on most of them, Anne lay looking up at the little round oranges and big, grotesque shadows which the night-lamp, set high up near the ceiling, made of Peg's falsies, still dangling over the rail.

Martha got silently out of bed and padded up the ward, out of the shadows and through the central cone of pale orange light, to see that all was well with Anne. Martha herself seldom managed to sleep at all. They talked very softly, their heads close together.

And later still, when the beam from the Night Super's torch shone through the transom, announcing that he was making his rounds, she passed swiftly back again. Anne felt for the capsule, now carefully concealed behind her travelling clock, swallowed it and gave herself up to the only really bearable period of the twenty-four hours—oblivion for a few of them.

She woke to early dawn greyness and a faint, hesitant trilling through the open windows. It gathered strength. Daylight gave back the substance to the shadows, and forced her to wakefulness and awareness again. She turned over on to her face, smothering her ears to try and shut out the sounds.

"Just talk—not necessarily to me. Just talk about anything you like."

"The most beautiful thing I can remember is the marshes on a misty evening. They had grandeur and a kind of spectral mystery, when the sheep trailed around with cut-off legs. They looked like ghosts floating over the ground and nosing about in the mist for their vanished feet.

"Another thing is a strong smell of geraniums. They were in my father's living-room in a row of pots along the window-ledge. The curtains had enormous, jangling brass rings on a thick bamboo rod, and he used to give me a bowl of warm water to sponge the leaves of a plant in a gorgeous pot made of little bits of coloured crock cemented together. There was the awful horror the day I knocked it off its stand and expected him to be terribly angry, and the relief when he only laughed and stamped on the pieces to break them smaller, because he said it had been hideous and he should have done it long before."

"Did he ever hit you?"

"He never hit me, and I don't remember that he ever kissed me either. We used to do *The Times* crossword and play chess. I would be about nine then, and was sent to visit him every Sunday afternoon. A man and his wife used to come for supper, with their grown-up daughter, and afterwards my father would play his violin, the woman the piano, and the daughter her 'cello, which they'd brought

with them. I remember it used to seem a very small daughter with a very big 'cello. The man and I had to be quiet and listen. I felt sorry for him always, because he would nod and struggle not to fall asleep. It was music I couldn't understand, but I liked it. And they always finished off with my father's old school song—'Forty Years on' it began—"

The psychiatrist made a note in her file and looked at his watch.

'Did he ever talk about your mother to you?'

"No—he never did. And I think I only ever saw them together once. That was one night after my Sunday visit—it had got much later than usual and he walked me back. My mother was worried and started out to look for me, so we ran into her as we turned a corner. She began shouting at him there on the pavement, and he answered back angrily.

"I wanted to scream at them to stop it. The street was lamplit and quiet otherwise, and I went on away from them and looked at a poster of a monk in a brown habit, holding up a giant-sized glass of custard. It was a lovely picture, he was smiling, but I could hear the angry quarrelling going on behind me and the lamp made their shadows queer and elongated against the monk. It was horrible."

The doctor looked at his watch again and closed her file. He was preparing to switch off his contact with this case, tune into the next.

"That's all we have time for today. I'm pleased with you. You're talking much more freely."

She went out from his office. What possible good did it do to go on raking up these old memories, half-buried fears, childhood terrors, the nightmare of the wheels? Did it really help you now to remember that once you had seriously been afraid to knock at your father's front door because you believed he was bad enough to be a murderer, which was the worst he could be, and today it might be you

he would murder? The doctor insisted that it did. So there were plenty of things like that she could remember for him.

Martha was waiting for her. Completely unlike as they were, they had become very close friends, and Martha had done much to help Anne through her first weeks when, enveloped in pain and confusion, she had sat about in the ward or in one of the common-rooms, registering nothing, doing as she was told, eating because it was necessary, aware of life around her yet with nothing able to interest, to stimulate life in her own self. Once she had watched a man walking towards her with a nurse and only when they were right up to her did she realize that the man was Paul. He came once or twice a week, and would sit quietly beside her. There never seemed anything to say.

"You had a long session with the quack," Martha said. "How's it going?"

"Better, I think. But I don't like the way he makes me aware that what is important in my life is just one in a line of case histories to him. He might at least look at that clock on the wall above my head, instead of at the watch on his wrist so many times."

Martha laughed.

"It isn't what he does—it's what you say that's your medicine."

They sat down on a seat in the courtyard behind the hospital. Martha had brought bread to throw to the pigeons.

"I really don't know why I encourage them. They're not a bit grateful, are they? They give us no peace upstairs."

She let her eyes rove over the whole length of the hospital building, and it was considerable.

"This place," she said, "is ugly all right, but it's like no other type of hospital you'll ever find, and it's something you can't appreciate while you're in it—not at first anyway—because you're ill in the kind of way when nothing seems good. Everyone's walking about, you can't see there's

anything much the matter with them. There's no wheel-chairs or stretchers. No locked doors or padded cells, thank God. You're pulled up at once if you happen to say 'mental' instead of 'neurosis' hospital in front of the staff. If you stay here a long time like me, Anne—which you won't—you see so much that's sad and could have you crying your heart out the whole time, if you'd let it, but—heartening at the same time, like it used to be in the war when people were in danger together. Do I sound silly and sentimental?"

"You don't sound silly, Martha."

"There's the bareness of it all, and the uncomfortable beds, and rules, and always having to be right up close against a lot of other people. There's queuing up in the canteen, and the badly cooked food. And then you see someone you'd thought was right finished, with dead eyes and nothing to live for, coming to life again, and it feels as though you've been allowed to see a miracle."

"Me—it's taken a long time with me because mine's nerves damaged by illnesses I've had. They'll never get me quite right, but they had me in here when I was about as low as I could get, for rest and company, and it helps. Take you now—you're a whole lot better already, even if you don't think so yourself."

They smoked and lapsed into a companionable silence, while Anne thought about what Martha had said. It was true that you often saw real despair among these people, but the next moment you could also see great courage. They were struggling, all of them, to get back—a little ground would be gained only to be lost and gained and lost again—but so often humour went along with the heart-break.

Overnight cures never happened. For months, sometimes years, you went on fighting to keep from toppling over into complete insanity, as it seemed you must do at any time. You were aware that you were abnormal and cut off from the world of normality. You only carried on from

day to day because there was nothing else you could do. And, whatever your treatment, however clever your doctor, however kind and understanding the company you kept, you knew that inevitably you would fight your battle alone.

The large majority of patients showed some improvement after a few weeks. It might be just a beginning, but at least some spark had been re-kindled. Sometimes you even dared to believe it was so with yourself. But, with diminished strength, could you ever hope to fan it back into some kind of vital fire again?

"Oh God—why should this destroying, unfathomable thing have happened to me?" you prayed, to a God who had no reason to concern himself greatly about you. "If you're punishing me for something, please change it. Please take away my arm or a leg—do anything else, but let me keep my reason."

With time, and simple expedients like making yourself go out and stand in the sunlight, forcing yourself to eat slowly and steadily instead of gulping down the food because they said it must be eaten, gradually trying to know and understand something of the others who peopled this strange, new world, the clouded days became just a little less obscure as each one went by.



Now that Anne had improved, they made one or two routine tests on her. She spent a morning with the psychologist. He showed her pictures made by ink blobs against a fold of paper, resulting in identical little men thumbing their noses at each other above a symmetrical stewpot. She arranged half a dozen drawings in order of sequence, as she had done with Nikky and Pip at bedtime from their puzzle books. She was asked which direction she would take from Southampton in the event of her wishing to get to Gibraltar. And she scored full marks because she happened to know that the population of the United Kingdom was around fifty million or so. She fell down on his very first question: 'What is the date today?' because dates and the passing of time meant so little here and there was nothing to distinguish any one day from another. As reward, at the end of it all, she was docketed with an I.Q. above the average.

She left him rearranging his little pictures and wandered aimlessly into the next department, which was the O.T. room where the everlasting baskets and rug-making activities went on. Enormous and barn-like, it had ugly bare wooden tables and a much littered floor. Apart from the wards, it was the one place in the whole hospital frequented by women alone, and now it was full of them, all noisily engaged on their chosen tasks.

At one end of the room a class of keep-fit enthusiasts bent and swayed in their stockinged feet to some nursery rhyme

ditty on a scratchy record. Two big carpet-weaving looms towered to one side—horrid survivors of some form of medieval torture. Shelves ran the whole length of one wall, and they were cluttered with bales of material, rolls of leather, baskets, trays, canvasses, furry animals, rugs, sewing machines—and miles and miles of cane. There were two water taps dripping down into sinks for wetting the cane, and through all the clatter and singing, calling and laughing, Mrs Dale's measured tones could just be heard mildly chastising a character called Henry, from the amplifier fixed to the ceiling.

The chaplain was passing from one table to another, the only man in this humming horde of women. He gossiped pleasantly with his bedside manner, and he had a book under his arm. He spotted Anne, where she stood in the doorway, and made towards her.

"Hallo, Mrs Lester—it's you I'm looking for. Here's the James Thurber I promised to lend you, and if it doesn't make you laugh I'll cut my throat."

"Not in my O.T. room, please!" The therapist was also there. She was carrying the bare skeleton of a lampshade.

"Now—Mrs Lester—"

Anne took the book from the padre, thanked him, excused herself to the lampshade, and departed. Anyone who could plait stubborn wet cane in and out of little upright sticks and find it satisfying, was to be envied, but it wasn't for her and she'd managed to dodge it successfully up to now.

She went on, without purpose, down the length of cool, wide corridor and through a door into the sunshine. It was hot outside and she sat herself on a step next to a sweet-smelling shrub, which spilled its flowers across the threshold.

Looking to her right she could see the tarmac road stretching away to the boundary and the main gate of the hospital. It ran perfectly straight for perhaps a quarter of a mile, and it was bordered on one side by a low brick wall

and a row of stubby, lopped lime trees, very carefully spaced, each one exactly the same height as its neighbours, but tailing off as she looked along them. On the other side, a wire fence topped a grass embankment which sloped steeply down to a railway line. At this hour the road was deserted.

To her left was extended the whole front of the long, red brick, unattractive, late Victorian building, dominated by its tall, angry, furnace chimney. The architecture was ill-designed and scrappy, with no harmony or pleasing proportions, and it made no attempt to look anything other than the institution it was.

Here, again, there was little sign of life. But directly opposite, where the railway curved sharply away from the grounds, were lawns soft and green, with people in summer frocks and shirt sleeves sitting in groups under wild cherry trees just dropping their blossom. The colour lay in pink drifts across the grass. There was a rule that everyone must do some kind of occupational therapy for three hours in the mornings, but provided you had a book or a piece of knitting beside you it counted, and an attendance mark went down on your record.

More of the delicate white petals showered round her feet. . . .

"All I'm asking is that from now on I don't have to keep hearing the little bitch's name over and over again."

Anne took out a lot of her indignation on the brush she was using to sweep up tinsel and spikes of Christmas tree, which had come down as she decorated it.

Paul was finding the whole affair amusing. He took the pan from her and opened the window to empty it out. The wind blew the bits back into the room again.

"The girl's lonely—missing her family. That's quite natural at this time, isn't it?"

He started sweeping up the spikes again.

"It isn't a natural sequence of events that, after she's told her employer's husband she's lonely and missing her family, she throws herself at him and slaps his face because he won't slide into bed with her. No girl does all that—unless she's got some idea the husband's about ready to go to bed with her."

Paul was in a good mood and he wasn't going to let himself get irritated.

"Either I keep my sense of humour about the whole thing, or I resent the way you're taking it and then maybe I will do just that. I didn't have to tell you about it, did I? I thought you'd be amused."

"Well, it's going to be very difficult having her in the house over Christmas. And what'll I do with her afterwards?"

"I've told her we'll pay her fare back home, or give her a week's salary and she must find another job. That should be easy enough for her, shouldn't it?"

"Of course. Women are treading on each other's heels for foreign girls, especially if they're here already, and their fare over doesn't have to be paid. That is, until they discover little Miss Lonely is making eyes at husband behind their back, and offering to fill in the bits that are missing in his love life."

Paul laughed again. He came and ran the brush over her shoulders, sweeping tinsel down into the pan.

"There's no reason for it that I can see at the moment, but I happen to be in love with my wife, and that makes me more or less immune to little French girls' eyes." He went off to the door with the pan and brush: "Except at Christmas time—"

He ducked as she grabbed one of the coloured glass balls from the tree, and red slivers ran down the white door behind him. Going back he kissed the tip of her nose and dumped the pan in her hands.

"You still look pretty, even when you're full of righteous indignation. But—sweep it up yourself."

Friends began to drop in for drinks. There was a lot of animated chatter about golf and gardens, and then the noise peculiar to all cocktail parties as words and voices and faces became indistinguishable. It was getting on Anne's nerves. She wished it was over and they would go. There was this business of replacing Lisa, who had been a good worker, and whom Nikky and Pip, at five and two years old, adored. They didn't take easily to someone new. Paul was looking bored himself. How much longer were these people going to stay? She regretted her peevishness and the silly scene she'd made with him. Of course he would never have encouraged the girl in their own house—Paul hated complications, and there'd be plenty which he'd have to handle if he were having any kind of an affair with the help. She wanted to tell him she was sorry. He was standing in a corner talking to the doctor's wife, and she caught his eye and mouthed 'I love you' at him. Then features which were distorted and mouths which shouted and cheeks which ballooned thrust themselves between herself and Paul. Arms gesticulated wildly and waved glasses. She wished she didn't get worked-up like this, as she kept doing lately, when images became blurred and grotesque and sometimes frightening. It wasn't until they were in bed that she felt better and was able to let him know she was sorry. . . .

She went down the few steps to the pavement, and started off to her right along the road, turning her back on the hospital which she hated so much. She could see that the gate was wide open, and there was no rule of any kind, absolutely no restriction placed on her freedom, nothing whatever to stop her walking through.

She would keep her eyes fixed on that opening, and not think about the space which had to be crossed before she

would get to it. Instead, she would send her mind back over the problems which she had that morning solved with above average intelligence quotient. It might very well have worked, if only she were able to remember a single one.

The sound of her heels on the tarmac clicked smartly, so she would march. There was an old jingle going through her head which she must have heard at some time: 'Left, left,' it went, 'I had a good job, but I left, left I had a good job, but I—'

For a few paces she did quite well, but her rhythm was shattered by a revolving roar as a train pelted past along the track below the embankment. She caught a glimpse of churning wheels flashing in the sunlight. Better not look towards it. Her heart was banging now, as well as her feet.

Why, in heaven's name, am I so afraid?

Here is only a road, a field, trees, the sky. I'm walking along the road because there's a gate at the end it's important for me to get through.

'Left, left, I had a good job—'

The limes, spaced so evenly along the right-hand edge, began to lean inwards over the low wall, craning their necks and arms to watch and wait for her coming. The long, grey road tilted upwards towards the sky, and the gate—had gone—

In its place was a barrier. Nothing to be seen or touched, but something just as sure and strong—inside your head—and it's going to stop you. Your throat is dry again and your hands sweating. And now it's beginning—the blankness and confusion, the throbbing pain and bursting in your chest which stops you breathing, and the fear—and the fear because you know there's really nothing to be frightened of—all welling up into such a huge, wild terror that you feel like nothing else but screaming madly and letting it all come out. There's a division across your mind. You're being forced towards the other side of the line. And suppos-

ing one day you do go over it, and out of control and scream and go on screaming? What will they do? Will they give you sedatives and while you are asleep bring the ambulance and hustle you into it, muffled in blankets so that no one can see who you are, as you've seen happen once or twice since you've been here, and it's never been said where the man or woman was taken to, except that it was to another kind of hospital.

She stood, as incapable of taking one more step forward as if she had been physically held down. Every day she tried, and every day it was the same. The gate was there, open and waiting for her to walk through, but she could never reach it. The hospital was always there also, behind her, an institution waiting to swallow her up again. Was that all there was ever going to be?

She almost ran back the little way she had come. Someone over on the lawn called out to her, but she kept her head down and pretended she hadn't heard.

She looked once over her shoulder, and the road and the trees were where they should be, and the gate had been put back in position.

"Can you tell me, please—?"

A voice directly in front of her halted her rapid progress along the pavement. She found herself looking down at a pair of feet planted on the path, blocking her way. Her eyes had been on the ground, and now they travelled up from the feet.

The man standing there was tall and thin, and he was wearing a tan velvet jacket with a scarf tucked in at the neck, although the day was so warm. He was coloured—his skin a brown a little lighter than his coat. His eyes were very dark and intense as they looked down at her.

"I was wondering if you could tell me where I can buy cigarettes?"

It was necessary to answer this man. With a vague, uncertain motion of her hand, she said "There is a shop—

if you go round here to the left, you'll see a courtyard—then you have to go across—”

“Thank you,” he said, gravely, “I’m sure I’ll find it.”

Then he was gone.

The panic had subsided—the need to concentrate and try to answer his request had helped it to go—and only the pain was left. The doctor kept saying there was nothing physical to cause it, that it was emotional stress, but he couldn’t be right when it had persisted continuously now for more than two months. But she would never be able to convince him, any more than she could ever find words adequately to tell him about the horror she had just passed through. The terror of being incapable of exercising domination over her own mind, and the terror of the certainty she had that it was always going to be like this.

As usual it had left her bodily exhausted, her legs unwilling to carry her farther. She went wearily up the stairs to her ward on the top floor, but they were still giving shock treatments and the ‘Keep Out’ notice was on the door.

In the deserted television lounge she pulled two chairs across to make a screen between herself and the door.

If only one were able to cry. There’s a yearning constantly for tears, but somehow they won’t come, and that relief is denied one. Instead there is only the dragging despair, the aloneness and failure, the desolation, and always and always the asking: ‘Oh, God—is it ever going to end?’

When Mike Colbourne came out onto the steps from the Men's Block, to take his first real look at the outside of the hospital, he was filled with a deep sense of gratitude, and was savouring every moment while he looked.

All he needed, for the time being, was right here for him.

External peace, the time to think and to learn to live with himself again, the chance of complete recuperation for his mind, which had been so sick. All in an environment where no one would concern themselves about the colour of his skin, where he would be accepted for himself, and where all the resources of their skill would be made available to him, no less than to anyone else.

It was a soft, gently beautiful day around the middle of May. He looked along the straight, clean, shady road which led away on his right to the main gate in the distance. One side of it was edged with a little wall and a row of trees which he liked for their jauntily cropped heads, and promised himself he would find out the name of before long. On the other side of the road there was a steep drop down to a shiny curve of railway line, the sunlight beaming up from the metal rails, the embankment neat and tenderly green.

Looking the other way he saw and appreciated the warm, red façade of the whole building, stretching along to his left. Its acres of windows sparkled; the chimney stack stretched as high as it could towards the bright sky; many

pigeons flapped and called out about its roofs. There was a flash of white as a nurse shook something out of a window, and along the whole front were well-tended flower-beds and banks of shrubs.

Opposite, spaced out in a big lawn, were more trees with pink blossom, and under them men, women and girls lounged, talking together and taking pictures of one another.

Living for the moment, as Mike always did, and sensitive to his surroundings, what he saw delighted him. There was the severe nervous illness which had struck him almost a year ago still to be fought and finally overcome, but after months of fighting it alone he had at last arrived here in England—at Highfield—this hospital. A man a little short of his thirty-third birthday, with two children to care for and no job, had plenty to occupy his mind, but the first thing had to be to get well again.

He felt in his pocket for a cigarette, but there was no packet. He needed one badly. Again he looked to left and right. Except for the lazily immobile patients over on the grass opposite, there wasn't a soul to be seen but a solitary woman who was approaching along the road from the gate. He couldn't see her face at all, for she was looking at the ground, but she was young and graceful, and he could hear her feet ringing on the roadway because she appeared to be in a great hurry. It was out of character to be in a hurry in this place.

She was only a few yards away.

"Good morning," he called.

She didn't look up or slacken her pace, and couldn't have heard him. There was something about her which touched off a memory, of what he couldn't be sure but knew it to be pleasant, and he was determined that she should answer him. Impulsively he went quickly down the steps and stood on the pavement, making it impossible for her to pass.

"Can you tell me, please—" he began.

She did look up then, and directly at him, and immediately

he regretted that he'd hindered her, for her face was strained and terribly agitated, her eyes imploring in a kind of frenzy. It was an intrusion to claim her attention, but she was making a great effort to give it to him.

“ I was wondering if you could tell me where I can buy cigarettes? ”

Martha and Anne kept their eyes upon Dorothy as she got up from their table in the canteen and went across to queue for three cups of tea.

She crashed heavily to the floor just before reaching the serving table, and one or two people who didn't know about Dorothy rushed to help her get up. But she wouldn't let anyone assist her, motioned them all away, and with a joke against her own clumsiness she struggled to her feet alone.

She hadn't been able to walk at all when she had first come, although nothing physically wrong could be found with her legs. She had also lost the sight of one eye—from a cause about which there was no mystery—and she knew it was only a question of time before the sight in the other went also. She was carefully preserving her failing vision for as long as her children were small and needed it. After working on her for months the hospital had given her back the use of her legs, so that now they only let her down occasionally. For her eyes they could do nothing.

She went on to collect a tray and the cups of tea, and they watched as she spoke soothingly to a bare-footed girl in a red shirt and jeans who stood at one end of a long bench placed at right-angles to the serving counter. The girl took no notice of Dorothy, but continued her sullen gazing at the stacks of dirty dinner plates, the cascades of messy cups and saucers, the bowls with sodden remnants

of potatoes and cabbage, and the bath full of used cutlery put to soak in cold water.

Then, without warning, she moved swiftly and efficiently along the whole length of the bench. Her heavy blonde hair fell over her face as she wrenched at the bath so that it tipped its contents and a flood of disgusting, greasy water over the floor. She swept on to push at one pile of crockery after another, until she had managed to denude the bench almost entirely of its contents. Then she ran to start ripping down the coloured posters from where they were pinned to the canteen wall. They bore slogans like: 'Have you sent in your contribution to the magazine this week—deadline is Wednesday evening'; 'Bingo in the Gym. on Friday'; 'Ward D.5. are your hosts for Saturday's Dance'; 'Can you Act?'

The sustained, crashing din of breaking china was followed by a momentary dead silence throughout the hall. Some people welcomed the diversion, some were nervously frightened, a few got up and hurried out. Then eating and talking was resumed normally, a nurse took the girl's arm and propelled her outside, and two orderlies brought out brooms and buckets and got to work on clearing up the mess.

The girl came from what was known as the Barlow Wards, a section of the hospital given over to a particular type of patient. They were all young, none of them older than their early twenties, and they were not ill in the same way as the rest, but were delinquent boys and girls who had been in trouble, were beyond parental control, and often had no homes other than the coffee bars they were picked up in.

They did pretty much as they liked and got up and went to bed when they felt like it. They wore bright, tight jerseys and loose coloured shirts with jeans, bare feet or sandals. Some of them didn't bother to get out of their pyjamas for several days at a time.

Scarcely a window remained unbroken in their sector. Escapades like this smashing of as much crockery as possible before being stopped, or setting off the fire-alarm throughout the whole hospital in the small hours of the morning, or rushing out ostensibly to commit suicide on the railway line, were always going on. They shared the canteen, joined in the sports, were invited to dances and cinema shows organized by the other patients, and occasionally they gave a party of their own in return.

There was to be one that evening.

Paul called directly after supper to see Anne, and he indicated a window on the first floor which had no glass. From it poured a lot of noise and music and the sound of shouting: 'One o'clock, two o'clock, three o'clock ROCK; four o'clock, five o'clock, six o'clock ROCK.'

"It doesn't sound as though there's much wrong with the people up there."

"They've hardly started," Anne said. "It's a party for someone who's going tomorrow. Someone who's been here two years."

They were sitting in the car in the drive and Pip was with them. It was only very seldom that Paul brought one of the children. He didn't think this was a good place for them to come to.

The little boy had brought his latest pet, a baby rabbit, to show Anne and he had it on a lead, like a puppy. They opened a door for him to get out so that he could give the rabbit a run on the grass.

She waited for the uncomfortable silence between them which was always there nowadays when they were alone together. She tried to think quickly of something trivial to talk about, for now they were living in such different worlds there seemed no common interest they could discuss. Taking advantage of Pip's absence, however, he said at once:

"I'm having Debbie home."

Debbie, the little boys, and home were the things she could least bear to talk about. . . .

Mrs Lucas, the daily woman, had stayed on to look after Nikky and Pip whilst she spent the afternoon shopping in the town. When Paul got home that evening she was feeling gay, with a fresh hair-do and a new dress.

"You look awfully pretty," he said, rather as though he was surprised to find that she still could. "And in that frock you hardly show."

"I feel marvellous—I've had a lovely afternoon. This time, I warn you, I intend to be completely spoiled when I'm in bed with the baby. I shall look helpless and glamorous and you'll be here to fuss over the little woman—"

She was hugging him with her arms round his neck. He put his briefcase down and returned her embrace, but something was lacking. She relaxed her hold and looked into his face.

"What's the matter?"

"I—wasn't going to tell you until later on—after we'd eaten—"

"Tell me what?"

Then she unclasped her hands and pushed him away from her.

"No! No—no, no, no—"

"Hush," he caught her hands. "The boys will wonder what on earth's the matter. You know I wouldn't have had this happen just now for anything."

"But it has," she slumped down resignedly. "Where are you going, and when, and for how long?"

"There's to be an extension to the plant in Cape Town," he said. "I'm afraid it could be another four or five months."

She caught her lip between her teeth as she turned and he followed her into the living-room. She couldn't keep the censure out of her voice when she spoke, although she knew it wasn't his fault. It was because he was making such a

success of the job that it was taking him more and more away from home, and for longer periods at a time.

"Surely you explained to them. Why is it you're always being sent away when I need you most?"

"Darling, of course I said everything I could to try and get out of going," he spoke earnestly. "I don't want to leave you just now. But it's my job, Anne—for you and the children and all of us. I inaugurated the Cape scheme before, these are my designs—as far as the bosses are concerned wives are having babies all the time. You can't expect that there should be anything special to them about us."

"You can't help it," she said, bitterly. "But I know that if it goes on like this—if we're always going to be parted so much—I'm going to hate the job. I wish we hadn't come to live in this isolated house. I wish we hadn't decided to have another baby. I wish I didn't have to be tied to the place like this. It's like being married but not being married—"

His daughter was born the day after he left for South Africa, and she was six months old before he came back. . . .

Paul ran his fingers round the groove in the steering-wheel while he waited for her response.

"Yes," she said, lamely.

Debbie was nearly two now, and his mother had been looking after her whilst the latest in a procession of foreign girls coped with Nikky and Pip at home.

"Lea wants to go back," he said. "She'll have been the year by the time she goes."

"Yes," she said again.

He looked at her with a degree of exasperation he did his best to control. Surely to God she might at least take some interest in the arrangements he was having to make. His mother had had the child long enough. A child needed

and should be looked after by its own mother. Didn't she care any more what happened to them?

"Don't you want to know anything?" he asked. "Don't you want to know how we're going to manage?"

"Yes," she said, for the third time.

"I'm engaging a housekeeper. She's costing the earth but I'm lucky to have got hold of her at all. I hope to God the kids won't get too much for her."

He looked at her again, expecting her to want to know something about the housekeeper, but she only sat looking down at her hands in her lap.

Then he said, "Why don't you come out with us for a run now?"

"No," she said quickly, in a voice he could hardly hear. "You know that I can't."

But he couldn't know, or begin to understand, what it felt like when buildings and hedges bore right down over you and windows were sightless eyes you couldn't raise your own to meet. How you couldn't bear to see the wheels of the traffic coming towards you—and it was always at you they came. How it strained what self-control you had to the limit to go out into a world which frightened you because it made you aware that you were in it but not of it. How it filled you with despair that the only place which accepted you was this hospital, which you hated so much but couldn't get away from.

"I don't see," he burst out, impatiently, "how you're ever going to get back if you won't try to come outside at all."

Pip broke in on her silent misery by tapping on the window to be let in. He sat himself between them and put his rabbit on her lap. She put her arms round the little boy. These were her people—the people she loved and really belonged to. But she couldn't get through to them. She longed to be able to do that, but there was her private wall enclosing her solidly, and there didn't seem to be a brick

out of place, nor a crack she could get her fingers into and work at. They had become part of a life she had once shared but which now rejected her.

"It's Feast Day at home, Mummy. That's why I'm up late. Couldn't you come back with us and see the fireworks?"

She kissed him, put the rabbit back in his arms, and quickly got out of the car, not trusting herself to speak. Paul started the engine, then leaned across and rolled down the window.

He looked up at her, the distress showing plainly in his own face. He turned off the ignition again and got out to come round to her as she stood struggling with her emotion.

"Oh, darling," he said, softly, "I do so hate to be beastly to you. But it's so difficult to know the right thing to say when I find I can't understand you any more. I miss you terribly—we all want you back more than anything in the world. It seems such a simple thing to go for a car ride with your husband. But I can't see you make any effort. You can't surely, want to stay in a place like this?"

The raucous noises of the music and the shouting came at them from the upstairs window. She shook her head, unable to speak. .

"I'll come again in a week," he said gently, and kissed her.

They went off with Pip's small hand waving from the window.

She watched them out of sight then turned to walk slowly towards the block where her ward was. Still the tears wouldn't come, when it might have helped so much to cry—there was just a big, aching lump in her chest. The idea of going in to sit and be alone with her thoughts was unbearable. She stood hesitating a moment then, desperate for distraction of any kind, went back to where the party was going on in Barlow.

The small room was stifling, suffocatingly overcrowded.

It had been crudely decorated, so that streamers, balloons and funny cut-outs hung down from the ceiling, through the fug.

All the Barlow boys and girls, and a sprinkling of the Highfield patients were beating it up, mostly without shoes, to music from a record player turned up to full volume. Bridget, Heather, Peg and several others from Anne's ward were among them. Some of the dancers just let go—steps didn't matter—but there were others who rocked grimly with controlled perfection and completely expressionless faces. A girl with a beehive hair-do, hare-lip and beautiful legs, was jiving spectacularly with a boy with a red beard and Tyrolean knickerbockers. Relaxing on the floor, with his legs up against the wall, was a little man with a figure like an egg, his hands folded on the hillock his stomach made. And entirely incongruous in the midst of it all, was an older man, fast asleep and motionless in a chair just off the centre of the space cleared for dancing. He didn't move a muscle, no one disturbed him, and he looked as though the slightest push with one finger would send him gently toppling to the floor, to continue his sleep there.

The coloured man whom she had seen on the steps, and who had asked her where he could buy cigarettes, was watching the door as Anne came through it. He detached himself at once from a group he had been talking with, by the window.

"I was hoping you would decide to come in," he said. "Will you dance with me?"

Without waiting for a reply he put his arm round her and drew her into the crowd. He was a head taller than she and he moved with a lithe, natural ease. It was necessary to dance very close together, staking a claim to one little bit of floor space and holding on to it.

After a while the noise abated somewhat whilst the record was being changed, and he put back his head so that he could look down at her.

"You have a dear little son," he said. "I was watching him from the window. I have one about the same age."

The din started up again with the beginning of the next number, making speaking impossible, and he steered her between the dancers, to the door.

"Let's get out of this and go and walk."

They went in silence round the end and to the back of the building, until they came to a ruined section of the hospital. Glass and rubble which had never been completely cleared away crunched under their feet. They crossed a paved courtyard from the broken slabs of which charlock and purple loosestrife grew knee-high and unchecked.

It still wasn't dark, but the lights in the town which they could see below them were multiplying every moment. An occasional bat came to swoop around the intruders, and there was a grey horse drinking from an old bath set down just the other side of the fence. Except for the music of the dance, which, made bearable by distance, now sounded almost mellow, it was very quiet.

"It's nice here, isn't it?" he said. "What do you suppose happened? A bomb?"

"Oh no. It's much more recent than that—a fire."

"Do you know where you sent me for cigarettes the other day? Two hundred yards across a playing field and into a boiler house!"

At that she had to smile, and the last of the lump which had remained in her throat went away.

"I'm so sorry. And really not very good company to-night, I'm afraid."

"Never mind. As you see, I did find the shop."

He produced a packet. They stepped through a crazily hanging door into the shelter of a gutted outhouse, and paused while he lit their cigarettes.

"I'm Mike Colbourne. What's your name?"

"It's Anne—Lester."

The first draw on the cigarette, the smell of charred timber which still hung about in the air, the other scents of the evening, were pleasant things. They went on over the rough ground, and he put his arm in hers to help her along.

"Will you have tea with me tomorrow—to show you really are sorry you made me wait so long for a smoke? That is, unless your husband and little boy are coming again "

"They came this evening because they couldn't manage tomorrow. Of course we'll have tea together. It's visiting day, so it'll be served in the hall. Shall I meet you there? "

"God—no," he said. "That's not what I meant at all. Let's check out of this hotel if only for an hour. We'll walk into the town. There must be somewhere there we can talk."

The stupid, unreasonable, shattering panic began at once. To be expected to walk the mile or so along the roads, to sit in a strange room and eat among strangers with, afterwards, all that way to get back again. Knowing that at any time the agitation and confusion could get out of hand, and at the very least make her look foolish in front of him.

But she had to hide it. She couldn't let him know she was so abnormal, so immature, so unable to exercise control over herself and perform a perfectly ordinary function like going out to tea.

He waited, watching her face closely, while she hesitated. Then she said, in as steady a voice as she could manage:

"I think—perhaps I'd better not go out, in case anyone does turn up to see me."

Before she had finished speaking his arm had stiffened and he had jerked it away from hers.

"It doesn't matter," he said abruptly, and turned at once to start back the way they had come.

She was bewildered. One moment he was beside her, relaxed and lighthearted, and the next he was striding

away into the dusk. He walked so fast that she stumbled and had a job to keep anywhere near him.

"Please don't go so fast. What's the matter?"

"It must be time we went back to the wards. You don't want to be marked absent."

He stalked on and from the back his shoulders looked hunched and his hands were thrust hard down into his jacket pockets.

"We have an extension until ten," she called after him, "because of the party. Is anything wrong?"

"It doesn't matter," he repeated. Then, still without looking back, he added sneeringly, "I should have known better than to expect you to walk out on the streets with me. I'm sorry I embarrassed you."

"What? Please wait a minute. I don't know what you mean."

"No?"

He was coldly polite.

"I can recognize, and I'm hardened to, rebuffs, however charitably disguised. But don't let it worry you. And it would never do to have you disappoint a visitor who might come to see you."

She stopped, understanding, horrified at the hurt she had caused him. Of course the lie had been so obvious—she deserved everything he must be thinking. But she couldn't let him go like this. After all—he was here because he was ill in some way, too. Perhaps he also had some mad quirk he didn't want people to know about.

She ran to catch up with him, pulling at his arm so that reluctantly he had to turn and face her.

"Stand still and listen, because I can't keep on shouting after you," her humiliation made her aggressive. "There isn't likely to be anyone for me. No one ever comes in the daytime. I can't go into the town with you because I could never get myself there. I've been here six weeks and I still can't get myself a hundred yards along the road. Don't say

'Why can't you?' I don't know why. It's illogical, and senseless, it's babyish—I know all that but I still can't do it. It wouldn't matter who or what you were—I'd give anything in the world to be able to go out to tea with you—Anyway—you're behaving just as childishly and stupidly as I am—"

He looked gravely back at her, then the lines of his face softened, his expression lost its fierceness and relaxed again.

"You know," he took hold of her hand and made her turn and walk slowly on. "A great many people have the same trouble. Hundreds of thousands of them. I know. You're not unique. They'll find out here what's behind it and it will pass."

"I wish I could believe you—but six weeks already—"

"Six weeks with a thing like this is nothing. You always have to give it time. I tell you what—I'll undertake to have you walking all alone to the village inside two weeks. After that we'll go farther for tea in the town. How about that?"

He looked searchingly at her.

"Only you've certainly got to believe first of all that you can do it."

It would have been churlish to go on arguing. She appreciated his desire to help her, was glad they were friends again.

They returned through the tipsy doorway, stayed some minutes with the grey horse, walked back past the window where the party was still going on and where the egg-shaped man was now sitting astride the sill—and so to the Women's Block.

They parted immediately, and as she went along the gravel path to the door, her step was lighter than it had been at any time since she had come to this place.

Two of the Barlow boys were dumping rubbish from last evening's party on a pile of refuse in the kitchen garden when Anne passed them. They sorted soft drink bottles, which they threw into a bin, and set a wooden box of torn, coloured decorations to burn. It was a fruiterer's box, lined with a thin, bright purple paper, and that was the exact colour of her father's coffin when, at fifteen years old, she had watched it resting where it waited for the small double doors to open and receive and burn and close eternally behind it.

The sorrow, if the queer, tight emotion she felt could be called that, wasn't because of his death, but because it could mean so little.

As she'd grown up she had felt a very great desire to have known this man, without being influenced by her mother's prejudice and hatred, which had started the childish fears and made an ogre out of him. He had been clever and cultured, but what had been the use of his brain and his wisdom if he'd passed none of it on to his child, but had abandoned her—when he'd had no influence in her development other than those disturbing Sunday afternoons when she'd been frightened to death, but oddly fascinated, by him?

'Forty Years On'—she remembered the song, and thought of the boy voices as they would be when he had first sung it. He had been destined to die—considerably

more than forty years later, for he was then sixty-nine—quite alone, unforgiven by his wife, unknown and unloved by his children. And the woman for whom he had left them and who had herself died so soon afterwards? Had their short life together made everything else—the loss of his family and friends—bearable? What kind of love could it be which, if you found it, made nothing else matter? Was he with her again and would that mean he hadn't been such a waste and a failure after all?

The coffin had slid down beyond their sight, with his fifteen-year-old daughter's speculations about it all no nearer resolution.

The Barlow boys put paraffin and a match to the pile and the purple box with its gay contents was well alight. They collected everything burnable they could lay their hands on, making a bigger blaze, having fun.

She was standing against a tall screen of runner beans, and someone came walking along the other side of the row. It was Mike. He grinned as he peered at her through the green and scarlet.

"Here you are. I've been looking everywhere."

She left the scene of the bonfire and went round to him.

"I've got a table booked. First we're going to play table tennis, and then we'll walk a little way."

Going across to the games room they ran into Sister George. She checked her pace, opened her eyes wide in surprise, quickly dispelled it, and said, "Shouldn't you be doing some kind of O.T., Mrs Lester?" before passing on without waiting for a reply.

Mike screwed up the net and they took their positions each end of the table.

She did her best to shake off the depression which the sight of the burning box had aggravated, but she wished, after all, that he hadn't been able to find her. This awful apathy made her reactions too slow and listless, and she didn't seem able to do anything about it. She stood

passively with planted feet, playing a tentative sort of pat-ball.

Patiently he sent over a number of gentle serves which she seldom managed to get back. Then he said, "Did you come down in a hurry this morning?"

"No. Why do you ask?"

"You haven't made up your face at all."

"Oh—that!" She grimaced. "What's the use?"

"It's a great deal of use, of course. Next time you remember. I'm not walking around with a young woman who hasn't got her best face on."

He served a faster ball.

"Can't you do better than this? You're trailing badly."

She had missed the serve but, stung to a suggestion of resentment at his criticism, she got the next one back to win her first point.

His next ball came faster still, and she had to move right across to return it.

"Perhaps you haven't played much before."

"Of course I've played—heaps."

"All right. We've warmed up. Let's really get started—from the beginning again."

He took off his velvet jacket, steadied himself, and slammed a serve at her. It was quite impossible to hold out altogether against his drive and enthusiasm. He began building up the pressure, alternating on her forehand and backhand, aiming to make her put up some kind of show, and getting what he was after.

Gradually her limbs relaxed and lost their listlessness, her eyes even took on a sparkle. The score kept very close. It was becoming important to let him see she could do it. And now he was having to work really hard himself.

Then, to her own surprise and delight, she had beaten him. She gave a yell of triumph and threw her bat up to the ceiling.

Mike went round to her end of the table. He was enjoying

himself enormously. He looked at her as, hot and flushed with exertion, she swept up her hair from her shoulders and held it in a bunch on top of her head.

"That wasn't bad—not bad at all," he said, approvingly. "You played well. But don't run away with the idea it's always going to finish like that. I underestimated you, that's all—I'm out of practice."

"I'll try to find time to give you a little coaching."

She laughed and he watched her, completely fascinated by the remarkable change that had come over her whole bearing, as gaily she crossed the room to pick up the bat from where it had landed.

She bent down to put her hand to the handle.

Across the green rubber face of it had been stamped in mauve ink the words—'Highfield Hospital. Not to be taken away'.

The words were familiar enough—pretty well everything movable was stamped in the same way—but they zoomed up at her from the floor now and exploded her brief bubble of animation. She drew her hand back, leaving the bat where it was, and straightened again, and all the radiance had slipped away, leaving in its place the lost, haunted, hopeless lassitude of before.

Afterwards, in the washroom upstairs, she peered critically at her face in the mirror. It had got thinner since the last time she had taken any notice of it at all, although the skin was still clear. Her lips were inclined to twitch when she parted them. The grey eyes had dark shadows under them, they were dull and lifeless, and so was her hair, which badly needed shaping and brightening. She gave it a good brush, then hunted in her locker for the lipstick she hadn't used for months. There was even a momentary excitement as she reddened her mouth and outlined her eyes with pencil.

Her skirt had stains all down the front which she hadn't noticed, the zipper wasn't running smoothly, and it was

easy to see it hadn't had a press for goodness knows how long. She changed into slacks and a clean white blouse before going down to lunch.

After that Mike was always there, waiting for her, knowing exactly what they would do with their time. The days began to have some meaning, to be shaped into some kind of purpose, instead of dragging sterilely on, one after the other.

He made her bowl, and play badminton with him, and volley-ball—which was something new for her to master. They attended every dance and movie, took part in the play and poetry readings, listened to record sessions together. He lectured her when she lapsed into not caring about make-up or what clothes she appeared in. He gave her books to read, or read aloud when she sometimes found it impossible to concentrate upon the print herself.

And every day he made her walk a little bit farther along the quarter-mile road to the gate.

It presented her greatest difficulty. She would stop and cling on to one of the trees, shouting at him that she couldn't get any farther. And he would always be able to get her over the panic. He would make her sit on the ground while he talked about anything at all, until she was calmer. Then he would insist that she went on at least another five or six yards before he would let her turn back.

There were some days when she saw little of him because of the treatment he was having to undergo. It was drastic, and could be fearful, and it always left him exhausted but afforded him great relief. He would have to spend the next few hours in bed and would not appear until the evening, usually too weak to do anything but sit with her in some spot as far away from other people as they could get. Then they would talk a lot.

"How long were you married, Michael?"

"Eight years."

"Do you want to tell me about it?"

He thought, seriously. "Yes—I find that I do. I've never

really been able to talk about it before. I've let myself wallow in a black hatred of my ex-wife, and I told myself I'd never put any kind of trust in a woman again, because of what she did.

"You can know it's happening all over the place, all the time, but when it's your own wife who's sleeping with every man in sight, it still takes a lot of getting used to the idea that you're going to break up and it's all over. I knew what was happening for some time, but I kept on pretending I didn't—and hoping. Then one afternoon I got home earlier than she'd been expecting me. I didn't know who the man was, and I can't remember what he looked like before I began on him. I can remember exactly what he looked like after—and what she looked like, because I couldn't get a hold on myself, and I beat them both up. The court gave me the custody of my two children."

"What's happened to them, Mike?"

"They're with relations—I've got a lot of brothers and sisters. Michael's the younger, he's almost five and his skin's very fair. Phillipa's seven, and brown like me. I'm impatient to get well and back to work—I'm going to settle here in England and bring them over."

"Do you know what job you will do?"

"Well, I kept the books for one firm for many years, and that's something I could always do. But later on I began to feel a terrific urge—and I've still got it—that the one thing I wanted to do above everything else was to teach, particularly to teach backward, retarded children—you know, the ones society hasn't got much use for. It would be so tremendously rewarding. I love kids myself—we get on well together."

"So I started on a course—English and child psychology, and filled in with accountancy in the evenings and out of term. That's when things began to go wrong at home. My income dropped of course, but I was sure I was doing the right thing."

He started absently-mindedly flexing and stretching his fingers while he was talking.

"How did your wife feel about you switching over to something different, like that?"

He shrugged.

"She'd never liked it, but I went ahead just the same. We didn't get out together so much; she had to put up with less money and less of me. Of course she turned to other men. I realized all that afterwards, but it couldn't make me accept the outcome any more readily. What are you working at all for, if your wife's stopped loving you and your life's a mess? I still had my children though."

They were lying on the grass at the far end of the playing field. He sat upright and rubbed his right forearm, kneading the flesh with the fingers of his left hand.

"Then I realized something was wrong with me, and getting worse every day. I was making out accounts at night but I couldn't master the figures like I always had—they were perplexing, and the system I'd always found so simple eluded me. The books began to be all wrong. It became a greater effort each day to concentrate. Then this thing started—a paralysis—only slight at first, just of my hand and wrist. Afterwards of my arm and shoulder and then later on it would be the whole of my side. I'd feel the stiffness coming on—it's doing it now, must be from talking like this—and I'd know I wasn't going to be able to move from wherever I was for anything from twenty minutes up to an hour, and in the end much longer."

"Michael!"

She was shocked and took his arm to massage it herself.

"It's all right," he said, "I haven't had it since I've been here. If it gets worse now it still will pass. It doesn't scare me like it used to, while I'm here in reach of the doctors."

"Would you like us to get back inside?"

"No—I want us to stay out here."

His hand and forearm did become numb and useless, but

it didn't spread any farther, and after half an hour the feeling began to creep back.

"That was nothing at all," he said "When I was really ill and had to give up the course and my work altogether, I still couldn't rest. I used to walk—on and on without knowing anything of distance or the district I was in. When the stiffness began I used to find a railway station waiting-room, or a park bench and lie down, waiting for it to go. Sometimes it would seem as though my whole being—except my mind, and that raced at double speed with disgusting, filthy thoughts I couldn't control—was dead. Then I'd kind of come to and ask someone where I was and find I'd covered miles, and walk all the way back. I couldn't find any doctor who could help me. That was when I put the children with my folks and came to England for treatment."

"Do you expect to get completely better, Michael?"

"What a question! Emphatically I do—and so will you. How can you ask? This is just a phase I have to go through—a transitory period. Now they've decided on the treatment and started in on it, it's just a question of being patient. I'm working with them, I'm co-operating like mad, I love this place—how can it fail? All their understanding and their skill and science they're putting at my disposal! They'll get me fit, and then it's up to me."

With renewed strength and a complete reversal of the black mood in which he'd told her about his broken marriage, he got up from the grass and pulled her to her feet.

"We've done no walking at all today."

"You shouldn't—after treatment. You're not strong enough."

"I'm not strong enough. I'll show you! Come on—you're not getting out of it that way."

They went to the beginning of the road to the gate, and started along it.

"It's no good. I appreciate what you're trying to do for me, Michael, but I've got to turn back now."

"My—how extraordinarily polite we are," he laughed. "I'll tell you when you've had enough."

"But I'll never do it. Those trees—with their arms out—they won't let me do it— Please—I've got to go back—"

"Nonsense. They're magnificent trees—very English and friendly. We're still only up to the ninth one and there must be at least fifty. What did you say they were called? "

"Limes."

"All right—we're only up to the ninth lime tree. When we get to the eleventh I'll let you turn back. You can't say I'm rushing you."

"Come to think of it—you've got such a colossal nerve—coming into my life and ordering me about at all—"

He laughed heartily.

"That's much better. You argue instead of getting agitated. The eleventh today, the thirteenth tomorrow, the fifteenth the day after."

"I'm so afraid I might start to scream."

"You won't scream. No one would take much notice if you did. Try it if you like and see."

So they went on, every day—despite all her protests and excuses—a little farther on to the gate. Until one morning she found herself through it—and at the corner. Was gazing along the village street with its parked cars and its shoppers.

Triumphantly he stood, watching her closely.

"Do these people realize—" she said slowly, at last. "Do you think they appreciate what it means to just be able to walk where they like? "

"Of course not. Why should they? Did you? "

She shook her head.

"Tomorrow you'll come along here alone. Can you see the little café up the street? The place with the sign? "

"'The White Cockatoo'? "

"That's it. They've got a real one inside. A beauty. It's

chained to a perch with a notice over it saying 'Don't swing the cockatoo'—but the urge to give it a push as you go by is irresistible. It gets so rattled."

He gave her a big, impetuous kiss on the cheek.

"Just as irresistible as it was for me to do that."

"Michael—what are the natives going to think?"

"What's the difference? They suspect we're nut cases anyway. I'll be waiting in the café tomorrow, and you shall swing the cockatoo."

He kissed her again, in the same way.

People passing them did look, and a boy on a bicycle gave a whistle. It didn't matter. If it hadn't been for his persistence she wouldn't have been standing there at all.

She tried to tell him so on the way back.

"It's only a means to an end on my part," he laughed. Then he said, more seriously, "Don't you know what you're giving me in return?"

Her hands shook a great deal as she pushed open the door of the little restaurant. But she had got there—and done it alone. It was a heavenly sense of achievement, made more delightful by the smell of fresh bread and coffee coming through the door to the back.

Michael had stationed himself at a table where he could watch her progress along the street, and he got up to welcome her. It was the first walking around in an independently gained 'outside' which she'd done for months. She made herself lean back luxuriously in her chair and took the cigarette he offered.

The place was full of patients and a few other customers, who watched and listened to them covertly. People from the hospital were expected to be 'odd' and perhaps to behave in an unorthodox manner. But there was no more than chatter and a lot of jesting—they were out of hospital environment for a brief while, and that was good.

The splendid white cockatoo was on its swing near the door, being looked at gravely by a fat little girl in a sun-bonnet, whose face was dappled with chocolate.

"They wanted to know where you were," Mike said. "'If you want to find Mike, look for Anne'—did you know that's what they say in my ward?"

He was studying her reflectively.

"It's quite extraordinary."

"What is?"

"I've realized at last who it is you remind me of so strongly. I should have remembered before—but coming up the street just now you had the same tilt of the head, the same bearing, the same—aura, with the sunlight behind you like that. It's a girl I saw through a window once. She was singing. I've always carried the memory of the song, and when I'm specially happy it comes back."

"What happened?"

"I would be about seven years old. Skinny—all knees and eyes I expect—and I was going by the window when I heard her. I'd a bundle of washing on my head—"

"Was it her washing?"

"I don't think so. My mother used to take in laundry because times were bad and nine children was a hell of a family to bring up. She'd tie up the clean stuff in a coloured tablecloth, and it was my job to return it. There was a tree in bloom—a bougainvillaea—near this window, and I put the bundle down beside it in case it should attract the attention of the girl. I could just see her over the top of the sill. She sang for a long time. She would rest and then start again and I was so entranced that when I finally came to I'd forgotten the address to which I was supposed to be going. So I had to take the bundle back home.

"My mother was mad at me, I remember, because I'd been gone two hours and someone was waiting for their washing. She was English, by the way—my old man was African. He gave me a belting with his strap, but the voice—singing like that—was worth any number of beatings."

"I'm glad I remind you of her, Michael."

"What shall we do with the rest of the morning?"

She felt like a child out for a birthday treat, not wanting extravagant entertainment, only simple delights.

"I just want to walk up and down this street, and look in every one of the shop windows."

"All right. We won't miss one. It's not much of a celebration, but it'll do to start with."

They went towards the door. The cockatoo lifted a foot and put its head on one side, watching Mike warily, knowing the treatment it was likely to get. It squarked loudly and its poll went up in a magnificent sweep when Anne put out her hand and gave its swing a push.

They bought ice-cream cones to lick as they walked through the market place; he put a big flat straw hat on her head; they sent picture postcards to Nikky and Pip and Debbie, and to his children. They studied the inscriptions on the stones in the churchyard, and stood where the sun through the windows made a broad coloured band across the inside of the centuries-old building.

"It's so wonderful here. Let's try and finish our walk at this spot every day from now on, Michael."

He looked at her without speaking, his expression completely serious for the first time that morning.

Paul was due in the evening, after supper, for his weekly visit. This time she was half-way down the road, waiting for him, and she told him how she had been all the way along it and into the village to have coffee with some of the others.

"You can't imagine how that little café means so much. It has pyramids of chocolate biscuits built up on the counter and fly-spotted crepe paper tacked along the shelves, and faded dummy chocolates in red and mauve boxes. All things like that. So ordinary—but so delightful, too."

There was nothing incredible in the fact that one's wife had walked alone along a road, through a gate and into a shop, and he couldn't show he was particularly impressed. He merely suggested that, having done it once, she should do it again with him.

But, oddly, the confidence had all evaporated—she knew she couldn't do it now. She joked that once was enough for that day, so as not to hurt his feelings, and they went instead round the playing field and the kitchen garden, avoiding the

couples snogging openly on the grass, or in concealed corners.

Paul commented as they went through an opening in a hedge and stumbled over a boy and girl, who hastily came out of a feverish embrace. "Just what kind of place is this? I thought everyone was supposed to be ill here."

She was still feeling elated from the morning's outing, and she enjoyed laughing at him.

"It's all part of rehabilitation—along with the baskets and everything else. There's terrific controversy among the staff about whether or not it's a good thing, but the patients themselves don't have any doubts about it. A lot of them are single and very young, so why shouldn't they pair off? Only they do break their hearts so much when some newcomer arrives and cuts in. And with the married women—well, you have to understand—they've had a bad time, suddenly they can feel they're getting better, and there's all the time in the world here for dancing, or for walking across the Downs with someone who's making them feel desirable once more. It's all supposed to hasten recovery."

He looked quizzically at her. She laughed again.

"I tell you—there was a man here whom everyone knew was being treated because he was impotent. But in the end his girl-friend had to be transferred to a maternity centre. There's some kind of testimonial for the place to be found in that, don't you think, Paul?"

He grunted. For him it had been a long, hot, tiring day, and he was glad to lie down on the grass and stretch out. A silence settled between them.

He thought how supremely unsatisfactory a situation this was for a man to find himself in. He moved his head to watch Anne, where she sat upright, picking at the grass, her face turned a little away from him. Her hair was shining, her shoulders and arms attractively tanned. She looked so much better—although there was always some

tension about her, always that fear of something or other in her eyes. But she was so much more alive, like she used to be—and very desirable. A childish helplessness made him want to go to her, and take her in his arms, and force her to understand that she had no need to be ill, if she actually was ill—he'd never really been able to make out what all this was about. That there was no need to feel alone and desolate and frightened, like she said she was. But he felt the extent of the gulf which had opened up between them. It was becoming more and more difficult to get across to her.

Was any of it his fault? He couldn't believe so. No woman with all she had, plus all he'd given her, should have allowed herself to break down. He'd always loved her devotedly, always worked hard to make her future and the children's secure. He'd been faithful the whole of the time they'd been married. When his whole world centred round his job and his family, it wasn't likely he would do anything to jeopardize any of it. She was intelligent enough to have appreciated all that. Why wouldn't she help herself now, make the effort she must be capable of, release herself from this half-dead, barren existence she was putting up with here?

He wondered, too, whether she realized the danger she was placing their relationship in. Here he was, holding down an exacting job and at the same time being expected to cope with the perpetual tedium of domestic affairs. He was going home in the evenings to be pestered about a sink which should never have been allowed to get stopped up, but which had; about boiler fuel which had almost run out; about new shoes for the boys. The housekeeper did her best but was afraid to make decisions involving expense, and she had a perfect talent for rubbing the children up the wrong way, so that there was constant irritation and squabbling. Sometimes, when he was extra edgy, he couldn't face the going home, would fill in the evening somehow,

and get back very late—alone, and with no one to welcome him.

It wasn't as though he had to be lonely. There was Jan, working in the same department, who was around him a lot in the daytime, and who had let him know she was perfectly ready to be around a lot at night as well.

Several times when he'd had to entertain important business contacts and had felt worried and disinclined for anything like that, she'd seen his predicament. She'd volunteered to organize dinner and the evening, and had done so smoothly, and with favourable repercussions to himself. Now he didn't hesitate to ask for her help when anything similar came up.

She had listened sympathetically when he'd felt he wanted to talk about it all to someone. Only this evening, when he'd dropped her at her flat, they'd discussed the situation again, and she had wanted him to go back tonight, after this visit. But somehow one couldn't contemplate going back to another woman after seeing one's wife like this, alone and suffering too.

Jan had said, looking at the whole matter as objectively and as efficiently as she did everything else, "Why not be practical? Why not set a limit? Give her some time. Give your wife another three months. After that—well, you won't have to feel you've done anything—unfair."

Anne—darling Anne—please, please get really better quickly—so that it can be you and me again. Don't make it possible for someone like Jan to ever come between us—

Impulsively he moved across the few yards which separated them and put his arms about her. Taken by surprise, she stiffened under his hands and looked startled, then, completely losing her composure she clung desperately onto him, her fingers grasping handfuls of his jacket sleeves.

"Oh Paul—can't you do something? Help me—please—help me to get out of this place. I can never do it myself. All those times when you were away—I used to tell myself

that no matter how bad it was, you would make it right when you got back. Make it right now—please— There's a barrier—some shutter that's holding me in—I don't know how to get over it— Please don't let me stay in this dreadful, dreadful place—”

“Would you come back with me now—tonight? ”

His eyes urgently searched her contorted face.

“Yes—if you'll help me— If I know you can help me—”

Then she gave a great sigh of despair and let go of him.

“It's no good—”

“Anne—listen to me—it's got to be soon then. At least it's got to be soon. Promise me you'll try very hard—promise to make a tremendous effort. That's what you've got to do—and only you can do it. It's so important—can you see how important it is for us? You must come for at least a week-end soon. I'll speak to the doctor—”

He waited.

“It's time for you to go now,” she said, dully.

“To hell with the time,” he said. “I want to know whether or not you understand how important it is that you shake this off. Christ—you can't like living crowded in with all these people. You say yourself it's a dreadful place. Look—would you like to go on to somewhere else now you've got so far—perhaps a more comfortable nursing-home, where you might feel happier and recover more quickly—? We could afford it.”

“No,” she interrupted him firmly, stopping his pursuing the notion any further. “I'll be in trouble if I'm not in in ten minutes.”

“To hell with it all.” he exploded. “It's taken me two hours to get here, and it'll take me another one to get home. All to have this little time with you. And we get nowhere—”

In the drive she stood by as with ill-concealed impatience he started the car and it moved off. To hell with wives who made scenes and were emotionally unbalanced. He felt so

helpless. His own outlook was getting bogged down and confused. He needed someone who was calm and clear-headed to put him straight, to think for him.

He braked and slowed so that he could look back at Anne, where she stood watching him on his way to the gate. The late sunlight was filtering through the trees bordering the road, and catching her shoulders and hair. She had one hand up to her mouth, pulling at her lip. The enormous mass of the institution buildings behind her made her look small and defenceless. In spite of her great distress just now she hadn't actually cried. But he found his own eyes were moist, and he drove straight home.

The personnel in the ward had changed a lot in the ten weeks during which she had occupied the end bed. Trudy, Heather, Peg and Pam, the girls who had been practically ready for discharge when she arrived, had long since gone. So had Little Joan and Ada. Martha, Big Joan and Lorna were still there, and Bridget had reappeared after an absence of a few weeks. She had been transferred to a hospital nearer to her home and parents for what she and all of them believed were likely to be the last months of her life. But the institution of a new drug had caused the doctors to bring her back for a last-ditch treatment with it. And now it, combined with much concentrated care, had wrought what appeared to be a miracle with Bridget, and she was already up to eight stone in weight.

The rest of the patients in the room had arrived more recently.

There was not supposed to be any talking during the rest period, which came directly after lunch, and they lay on the tops of their beds reading and smoking, or dozing. When it was nearly over a girl called Phyllis came along to perch herself at the foot of Anne's bed.

They watched Mary, on the next one, as she spread an array of her clothes across the cover, examining and folding each garment with exaggerated precision. She was a middle-aged woman, tall and sharply angular, extremely intellectual, with a ruddy face which was twitching now

in agitation. They didn't need to be told what was troubling her.

"You've worn the brown one each time your mother's come," Phyllis said, wanting to be helpful. "So why don't you wear the green one today?"

"Because she'd comment on it at once and say it needed pressing or there was a spot on it, and I can't bear to have her mention my clothes."

"But it doesn't need anything doing to it. It's perfectly clean as it is."

"I know, but she would find something wrong with it, and I wouldn't be able to answer. I'd just start crying, and then she'd fetch Sister in to me, like she did before."

"What is it that makes you get so worked up when your mother's coming, Mary?"

"I can't tell you what it is. I suppose—it's because she's so—strong."

The flush in her cheeks went all the way up to her temples.

"She's never let me have any choice in my clothes—or in my friends, or my recreation, or anything I do. You two don't understand what it's like to be under a dominating personality all your life, and have everything settled for you without even being allowed to express your opinion."

Usually painfully reticent and uncommunicative, she unleashed a stream of heated, emotional vehemence, while wringing a long woolly vest between her hands.

"You'll think it's funny, I know—but I've never been allowed to wear make-up. I've never had a man friend, so I get scared and behave like an idiot when one speaks to me. I hate to have you know that. I hate to have the rest of you see these hideous underthings. I hate myself because I submit to it at my age. Most of all I—I hate my mother. I want her to be dead. But if she were dead I'd have to do things myself—"

They did their best to find comfort for her.

Mary was entirely preoccupied with the few clothes she was allowed to possess. She found it extremely difficult to start the necessary steps to dressing and undressing, and practically impossible to change from one set of garments to another. She would worry to the point of distraction about which of her two skirts she should wear three days hence. Not that she was slovenly—by nature she was scrupulously neat and over-fastidious, which only added to her self-recrimination.

"Mary," Anne said, "as soon as I can get as far as the town we'll go together, and you shall choose the most glamorous undies we can find. And nylons, instead of those lisle things. Never mind what your mother says—you'll like her much better when you've done it."

Mary was afraid of men because she'd never known any. Phyllis had an unquenchable revulsion for them all because, in her early teens, a sex maniac had raped her. She was twenty-nine now, a slight girl, delicately attractive, but she suffered so acutely over anything to do with sex that she would get up and run from the room whenever it or the mention of babies came up. To even see the women in the ward undressing was more than she could stand sometimes. But she adored children after they had reached the age of five or six, and she spent most of her time helping in the children's section of the hospital, which was located in a separate part of the grounds.

Big Joan finished making-up her eyes and waved the pencil in time to the music coming from the radio.

"That's Buzz," she drooled. "Isn't he heavenly? Oh Buzz—if only I had you here now. You know what, girls—one night with Buzz'd get me out of this place ten times as fast as old Paddy and all his pills are doing it."

There was a general laugh with her, and a light-hearted joining in of the game from the others—to choose their one

man to provide the panacea they were all looking for, if only they could lay their hands on him.

Someone threw open the door and shouted 'Tablets, please.' Two nurses came in to start their bed-tidying rites. Sister George—the Dragon, as she was inevitably nicknamed—followed and looked piercingly to make sure no one had left a dirty cup or untidy locker to offend the eye of any visitor, the first of whom were expected in a few minutes.

"Dr Patrick will see you this afternoon, Mrs Lester," she announced.

He fitted in his in-patients whenever convenient to him, irrespective of one's possible visitors. As far as she was concerned, she never had any except Paul, and he came on one evening a week. She washed and made-up her face before going downstairs to wait until he beckoned her into his room.

He had started her on a course of injections which, he said, would overcome the tension and help her to relax. She lay on the couch, steeled herself to the needle as it went into her arm, felt the uncanny sensation of an influence outside her control taking over, closed her eyes as faces and places began to swim behind her lids, wanted to pour out words in a heap. . . .

Swinging the heavy rope was making her arm ache badly, with Johnny vigorously twirling at the other end, but there were still Babs and Frinny and Joey to skip, so she mustn't let go or they might not let her play again. 'The doctor's always saying he never expected I'd be able to rear Anne to this age' her mother was saying to the woman downstairs, who was chubby and rosy, with a husband who was always beating her so that she ran screaming up the stairs to Anne's mother for protection. From a top window came a shout—'Joey, how many more times must I tell you? Your father'll lay into you if he

doesn't get his supper soon '—and Joey leaving the skippers and setting off at a run to the fish shop, colliding with Anne's own father, whose tall figure with the beard and the silver-topped walking-stick came striding round a corner. She backed from him and ran away, across the pavement into the shelter of a telephone box, and he came after her and raised his finger against the glass, wagging it in a warning at her. Then the finger changed to one which was red, bloody and hateful, lying in the fat palm of a man in a shirt stained with sweat under the armpits. 'Phone quickly for an ambulance, Anne—the boy's cut off his finger in the guillotine.' Her stomach turned over as he held the finger right up near her face, but she managed the call, then came to on the floor with his arm round her shoulders—her office towel, stained red where he had wiped the blood off his hand, beside her. 'Lie still, little girl—a bit longer.' Old, at least forty, he had a puffy chin and red lines across his eyes and he breathed noisily as he held her tightly with one hand and ran the other down the row of buttons on her blouse. The hand which had held the bloody, cut-off finger was inside her blouse, stroking her breast: 'Don't be scared at all—I'll make you feel very happy.' Clawing at his eyes so that at last he had to let her go, swearing at her; she dropped the soiled towel into the waste basket, while the anger went and instead she felt alone and rather frightened, with tears stinging the backs of her eyes. 'Forty Years On'—that was the song again, the boys' voices, the coffin in the crematorium, the purple box burning— It began to revolve, faster and faster until it was a churning wheel, and there were many wheels, always getting nearer, always coming straight at her. . . .

The doctor was saying, "That's as far as we'll go today," and she swung her legs off the couch to put on her shoes.

"I want you to begin going home for week-ends."

"Oh! "

She started, one shoe still in her hand.

"Why did you do that?"

He took her up quickly, though his voice was as imperturbable as ever. When she didn't answer because she didn't know why she had done it, he persisted:

"Why don't you want to go home? Tell me why it is you prefer to stay here?"

"That's—silly. Of course I don't prefer to stay here. No one could."

"You didn't give me the impression you were glad when I said you might go home. You've never at any time suggested I should let you go."

"Only because—I'm still so afraid of going out— It's a long way—and going back after such a time—"

"Your husband would be there, wouldn't he?"

"So far as I know."

"Well, I think we won't leave it much longer." He was ready to dismiss her. "Sister George tells me that, from what she sees of you, you should be quite ready to make the attempt. We have to get you away from hospital influences. Sometimes they can get too great a hold on one."

It was teatime. She threaded her way across the hall, where those patients who had visitors were sitting at small tables, and went to the canteen. The rest were already inside.

Only one man hung about outside the swinging glass doors, and he was a big, husky Canadian named Martin. He captained the cricket team and was universally popular for his unfailing good-humour, his gentleness in spite of his size, and his tremendous guffaw, which he was always ready to release at the slightest provocation.

He didn't look at all like laughing now, and was holding back because, in common with many other men as well as women, he had difficulty in facing up to the ordeal which going into the canteen held for him. He would thankfully have skipped meals altogether, if they would let him, rather than have to do it four times a day.

He entered with Anne and kept his eyes on the floor as he walked beside her. They went the length of the long, long hall; passing the serving counter, where it appeared to take nine of the staff (canteen hands, nurses on duty and Sister in charge) to serve each patient with his tray of food; passing the chattering, shuffling queue which stretched from the counter right down one side and all the way across the far wall; passing the big tables ranged along on their other side, each with its white cloth, its saucer of golden syrup, and its wet dessertspoon staining the sugar in the communal bowl (no teaspoon had ever been seen by any one in the vicinity of the canteen). to take up their positions at the end of the crocodile. There was a vast amount of noise which echoed up to the high ceiling, and a strong smell of the pickled onions to be served with the cold sausage for supper later on.

Half-way down the hall Michael waved from a table and indicated that he had turned down a chair for her.

She and Martin were the last to come in but, as tea only meant collecting your tray and putting your cup and saucer and plate on it as you went by, the queue moved quickly.

Immediately in front of her was a boy called Dave who was very handsome and muscular, and who was tapping from one foot to the other as he waited. He turned round to apologize when he almost danced on her feet. He made a living as a prize-fighter with a travelling show, always wore his trousers very tight, his sleeves rolled up to the tops of his strong arms, and his shirt unbuttoned to the waist, showing a suntanned chest covered with blond hair.

He was an amiable boy, very agile, hardly ever kept still, and he grinned happily at Anne.

"Haven't seen much of you lately, lady," he said. "How are you?"

"I'm all right, Dave. What about you? Any signs of them letting you go yet?"

"Naw—they're still giving me this dope. You know how

it is—trying to tame me down. They say I'm too excitable—must be more emotionally stable. That's a good one! Who wants to be emotionally stable? You women don't want your men to be emotionally stable, do you?"

She laughed aloud.

"You shouldn't ask me. What does Sally say about that?"

Sally was his current girl-friend. They had reached the stack of trays. They each took one and continued on towards the buns.

"She says you don't," he said, lightly. "Me and Sal talk about a lot of things together. She tells me what you all say when you're up in that ward at night, getting ready for bed. You know what I think? They're all frustrated—that lot up there. They all want a man."

She laughed heartily again as she set a thick cup, overflowing with dark-brown tea, onto her tray.

"Is that what it is? They don't have to look very far if all they want is a man, do they?"

"Not you, of course," he nudged her with his elbow. "You're going steady with that dark friend of yours."

She took one of the slices of bread and margarine which were lined up in hundreds on the counter, and said good-humouredly, "Dave—I'm not going steady with anyone. Certainly not with anyone here."

"No?" He put his big hand under her upper arm, balancing his tray with the other. "Then you can come and have your tea with me."

Mike had crossed over from the table to take her tray.

"I've saved a seat for you," he said.

Dave's grip on her arm tightened.

"Oh no, you don't," he said, still amiably, "you're having your tea with me."

She tried to pull away.

"Let me go, please Dave."

The smile went from his face and he began to scowl.

"Dave—please—I did arrange to sit with Michael."

"Oh you did, did you?" his voice rose and people round about began to notice. "You think I'm not good enough. That's it, ain't it? You can go and sit with that bloody nigger, but I'm not good enough."

He still kept his grip on her arm. She looked at Mike and saw his eyes narrow and his jaw jut out.

"Let go of Anne's arm, Dave," he said, quietly, "and behave yourself."

Dave compressed his lips and drew in his breath. Then the tray, balanced on his open hand, went hurtling up into the air. It came crashing down to spill hot tea over the legs of a woman patient. She let out a high-pitched scream.

"You black bastard!" he yelled, at the top of his voice. "Don't you tell me what to do."

He shot out his fist, and Mike pulled his head aside in time to avoid the blow. Dave came on at him. The two men began punching each other, and in no time at all there was an uproar throughout the entire place. The woman who had had tea over her legs kept up her shrieking as she scurried around to keep out of their way. People jumped up from the tables and crowded round to get a closer view. The Barlow patients were seated at their end of the hall. They loved a fight and, grabbing their tin trays, they turned astride on their seats and beat them as hard as they could on the backs of their chairs. Sugar from the bowls flew in white arcs across the tables, and a couple of boys with a private grudge took advantage of the disorder to start a scrap of their own.

The staff were always on the watch and quick to deal with disturbances. Two male nurses separated Michael and Dave, one pushing the protesting boy back onto a chair and talking to him until he calmed down, the other remonstrating with Mike, who stood with his arms folded and a face like thunder.

When order had been restored Anne sat down to drink

her tea, and eventually Mike turned from the nurse and walked out of the door. She gave him a few minutes before following. He was waiting in the road outside, dabbing at his mouth where his lip was bleeding a little. He smiled as she approached, fell in step with her, and they started off towards the village.

"Want to go and swing the cockatoo?" he asked. "Somehow or other I seem to have missed my tea."

"Of course."

Because she was feeling considerably upset for him, she lapsed into silence. He looked at her sideways several times, then said:

"Well, you could at least find something to say—even if it's only 'Hello, Mike'."

"I'm most awfully sorry, Michael."

"What are you most awfully sorry about?"

"That Dave insulted you because of me. I should have handled him better."

He laughed as though he was really enjoying himself.

"Anne, my sweet—don't ever think I punch people just because they call me coloured, or black, or a nigger. I'd have worn myself out long since! Dave took a swipe at me just now. When anyone does that I instinctively hit back. That's all there was to it. I just wish you hadn't been around to see it

"The other thing, about being coloured, I've had to learn to take and now I can take it, so a decent kid like Dave isn't going to goad me into retaliation. You can be quite sure about that."

She smiled her relief. As they walked the next few yards his manner changed from good humour to one of reflective moodiness, and then to bitter hatred.

"There have been no end of times in the past which I could tell you about— You've got small children yourself, Anne, but you'll never know what it feels like to have your little girl carted off by two grinning, uniformed policemen

—frightened to death and not knowing what it's all about —because she had dared to sit on a park bench reserved for whites only, and because she was too little to read the notice saying so. It's happened to my child. That's when you feel you could turn on them and go berserk, and smash them to a pulp—and not give a damn what happens to yourself afterwards."

He hunched his shoulders and slid his fists hard into his pockets. A trickle of blood ran from his cut lip.

"I'd be out searching the streets for her, asking everyone if they'd seen her, and then I'd learn what had happened, and the swine would be holding her until I got there to pay the fine. She wouldn't be able to speak for sobbing. And I'd have to stomach it all without a murmur.

"Or when my young son, who's as white as you are, would run to sit in the front of a 'plane, excited and calling out to me to come and join him, and be told by the stewardess that he must go to the back because I'm only allowed to occupy the rear seats."

She was profoundly affected, and put her hand on his arm. He shook her off, fiercely.

"But don't pity me," he said. "The last thing I want from you or anyone is pity."

Then he was sorry for his brusqueness, and the intensity of his hate and anger went as rapidly as it had arisen.

"Never mind," he said. "All that goes on, and you never quite get used to it. Here we are at the gate. I shall leave you and you're going alone across the common to the railway bridge. I'll go the other way round and meet you on it."

"Mike—it's miles. Not so far—please. And what about your tea?"

"I'm not hungry, after all. It's fifteen minutes walk, and it'll give me time to cool down."

She called after him as he was crossing the road.

"Michael—you'll be sure to be there."

"You know I'll be there," he said. "See that you are."

He disappeared, and apprehensively she crossed to the edge of the common and looked at the wide, empty expanse of land and sky in front of her.

Stupid it was—to be so afraid, like this. She started across the scrubby land. With very few people about, the late afternoon was golden and green, the bushes in early summer freshness, the sky so clear and bright. It was perfect. Why couldn't she enjoy it because it was perfect—without this gnawing, frantic terror of something unspecified but tremendous, which could so quickly grow into panic and spoil so much simple pleasure? Here was the sweat coming into the palms of her hands, here was the tightening in her chest, the labour of breathing. She stopped and looked back, trying to hang on to her composure. Some gangers walking along the railway line, their picks over their shoulders, whistled at her, and that forced her to move on—in case they should think she was acting oddly.

The path ran along by the side of the line, with just a barbed-wire fence separating her from the embankment. She hoped a train wouldn't come while she was alone. It looked a long way ahead to the grey stone walls of the little bridge.

Then she saw Michael's figure moving among the bushes on the far side of the railway. He was almost there and she waited while he disappeared between the walls, hoping he would relent and come out this side and back along the path to meet her. But there was no further sign of him, the workmen had passed on, and again it was all empty and still.

She did go on, and came up to the bridge herself.

He was lounging against one of the walls at the other end, his hands still in his pockets, but all trace of his black mood had departed. He laughed while she pulled up short, taking great breaths of relief. Then he stopped laughing and came to stand in front of her, just looking down at her face, without speaking, and suddenly very serious.

She found herself unable to keep her own eyes from looking right back into his.

"It's so—silly," she said, ineffectually. "We—should have chosen the—cockatoo—"

He put his hands one each side of her face and continued to look searchingly at her. She was aware of how warm the sun was on her face, how gentle the little breeze which blew her hair away from her neck. This was a moment which wasn't going to let itself be diverted from its purpose. A moment which had to be allowed to follow its course.

There came a scuffle of footsteps from the far end of the bridge. Two dirty little boys, wholly engrossed in their own affairs, appeared round a wall, and the moment had passed. They came on until they were level with the two already on the bridge. One boy was carrying a baby thrush, which he strove clumsily to wrap in a grubby handkerchief. The other had a catapult.

"Oh no," Anne exclaimed, "you couldn't have—"

The owner of the catapult looked as horrified as she

"Why no, Miss—this is for the trains. Three winders since dinner today! The little bird—we found it by itself on the ground. We're trying to feed it."

"You know," Michael said, "I think it was a mistake to pick it up. Let's find the place and put it back again"

They were persuaded to carry the throbbing little thing back to the spot where they had first seen it, and all four stood at a distance and watched with relief as the anxious mother found the baby and fed it.

That night in D.5., which was a men's ward, Dave sat sheepishly on his bed, pulling off his shoes. Next to him Mike lay in his pyjamas, reading. Dave was unhappy until he could get his apology off his chest.

He lined up his shoes under the bed, then said hesitantly, "Mike."

"Hullo."

"Mike—I just want to say—I'm sorry. I called you a nigger today. I had no business—I just want to say I'm sorry."

"That's all right, Dave," briefly Mike took his eyes off his book. "Don't think about it."

Dave, having taken the plunge, found his own self-righteousness far too agreeable to relinquish without exploiting it to the full.

"Naw—but really—I open my trap too much, I know I do. Someone ought to shut it for me sometimes. Calling you a nigger—when you ain't even black—"

"Don't let it bother you any more. Goodnight."

"Honest, Mike—I just got to tell you I'm sorry before I go to sleep."

"You have," Mike turned over a page. "Now—don't let it bother you any more."

Dave stripped off his shirt and pants and got into bed, lying happily back on his pillow.

"She's all right."

"What?"

"She's all right, that Anne. And, after all, if she wants to go around with a— Gee, Mike, there I go again. I sure am sorry."

Mike closed his book with a snap and sat up, holding on to his patience

"Dave," he said, "I don't mind how many times you call me a nigger. But I get bored when you so much enjoy telling me you're sorry that you keep on doing it. And leave Anne out of it—"

Dave shut up then, turned over onto his side, and was soon asleep.

Michael didn't pick up his book again. He got under the covers, but for a time he lay looking through the window as the daylight dwindled. His eyes were troubled, and sleep took a long while to catch up with him.

After leaving the boys at the bridge, and walking back with Michael, Anne ran up the stairs to the ward to be in time for the evening issue of drugs. There was already a crowd round the nurse and her trolley. As she opened the door and joined them the babble of talk subsided abruptly. She swallowed her tablets and was about to go downstairs again when Martha detached herself from the rest and caught up with her.

"I'm going home tomorrow, Anne," she said.

"Martha! Oh—I am sorry. At least, of course I'm glad for you. You know what I mean. I'm going to miss you so much. You're part of the place—"

"I shall miss you, too—all of you—very much. Remember what I told you when you first came—that people often didn't want to go home; didn't want to have to face the outside again? That applies to me all right. I haven't anyone to live with, you know—and I dread the thought of going back to be alone. But I'm as better as I'll ever be. They've had me here a long time, and now they want the bed. I wish you would write to me sometimes."

"Of course, Martha—of course I will. I'll be glad to. It's going to seem so different here, without you."

They emerged outside into the courtyard. Pigeons were there by the score, as usual. They knew Martha well, she brought something out for them after every meal. Now she produced half a packet of biscuits from her pocket, and

the birds flapped and circled round the two, getting in the way as they walked.

"Anne—we've got to know each other well these past months, and I'm a good deal older than you are—so you won't mind if I put what I want to say a bit badly, perhaps. I have to say it before I go. When do you think you'll make a start at getting back home?"

Anne said, "I don't have to tell you, Martha—it isn't only the physically going back, is it? I can't be sure I'll ever get really back. If only I could be sure."

"I used to wonder what a girl like you was doing in this place. Not because you were ill. No one knows why people who seem to have everything still break down. And you did seem to me to have everything. Even when your face was strained, and you hardly spoke, or cared what you looked like, anyone could still see how you must be when you were well, and why your husband should think the world of you. And the pictures you showed me of the children and your house—they're lovely. Don't let anything or anyone stop you from getting back to them, Anne—as quickly as you can."

Anne threw her last piece of biscuit to the birds, and thoughtfully brushed crumbs from her skirt.

"You know, Martha—a doctor told me once that the drugs I'd taken so many of were able to change my whole personality. At that time they had changed it to make me sly and deceitful and scheming. I knew it. I wanted to hide myself behind furniture so no one could creep up and take me by surprise. Yet when they did come near me I would catch hold and beg them not to leave me alone. I used all kinds of lies and excuses to make them stay. I could feel I had become like that, and it was hideous, but I couldn't do anything about it. I'm not like that now, but all the same I feel I'm never going to be the old 'me' again. Being here—seeing all that goes on with people, the suffering, how they have to live—that changes you. There are so many

things I used to take for granted before, but which don't fall into place any more. It's a long way back, Martha—and none of it is clear."

"Do you remember what you were like when you first came here? You used to stand against the wall most of the time, holding your head."

"I'll never forget it. I'd stand against a wall at home, too—all day long, because I wouldn't be able to remember what was on the other side of a door. It had to be a plain wall because patterns turned into faces and they were all watching me. It was a nightmare I had to sleep to get away from. They said it was the drugs—but I only took them in the first place because I was desperate. If you've once been like that, Martha—near crazy—how can you ever hope to forget or be certain it isn't going to happen—suddenly—again? That's why I'm afraid to go home."

"Because you were very ill then and now you're rapidly getting better. Because it didn't happen 'suddenly' before, and it never would. You're being your own worst enemy by dwelling on it so much. You go out all the time now, round the district here. If you can do that, the next step is surely to try going home for a few days at a time, isn't it?"

"I can't do it without—I can't do it alone, Martha. I have to get my confidence back—my own independence. I still can't go out by myself, and it's humiliating to have outside people know that. They never understand."

"Do you know what the women were gossiping about up in the ward just now?"

"I can guess by the way they shut up when I appeared. Was it about the fight in the canteen?"

"Yes—it was. I don't want to interfere in your business, Anne. You're not a fool or a teenager. But I should hate to see you make a fool of yourself—or get into a situation you'd be sorry for some time. I hear how the women talk—and the staff. They couple the two of you together always. They're quick to catch on to anything—there's been so

much of it before. Men and women getting involved with each other, even marriages breaking up and a lot of people getting hurt. In this case they gossip a bit more and snigger a bit more—" Martha hesitated.

"It's all right, Martha. Because he's coloured."

"Well—yes. There are only one or two coloured patients here, and you're a person people take notice of, so naturally it's going to attract a lot of attention. I wanted to be sure you know that there *is* talk."

They had circled the courtyard completely by this time, and had arrived back at the door. Martha had to go in to collect her possessions and pack them ready for leaving the next morning.

"I don't think," Anne said, slowly, "that I'm able to explain my relationship with Michael. If I could it would be to you. I only know that if it wasn't for him I should most likely still be standing against a wall somewhere, holding my head. I'm eternally grateful to him, Martha. So I don't care how they talk."

"All right," Martha shrugged, "I've said what I felt I had to say. As long as what you feel for him is gratitude— But you won't let even gratitude make you forget that other people were every bit as anxious to help you, only the opportunity wasn't made possible for them? I'll let you have my address before I go. Don't forget to write to me."

She went inside and Anne walked slowly on to where the door of the small chapel stood open. She passed into its cool, dim fragrance. There were very few places in the hospital where one could be quite solitary, and quiet. This was one of them, for except for Sunday services it was used very little by the patients. But a handful of them, herself included, came every morning after breakfast for half-an-hour's Bible reading.

She sat down in a pew near the door.

Thinking was much easier nowadays than it had been. The pain, which had overridden all attempts at concentra-

tion and reasoning, only came back in moments of real stress. But, inevitably, being able to think again meant that whole issues which had been content to remain dormant before were now coming up to the surface and challenging her attention.

Here, where there was at least an external peace, she sat and thought about Nikky and Pip and little Debbie, and about Paul. She still couldn't make herself feel they belonged to her; they still were part of that world which remained very much 'outside'; they still lived their normal lives in a house where she had known so much frenzy before finally collapsing and becoming, herself, abnormal.

To submit herself to that kind of terror again—

But it was important not to let oneself stand still, even though going on meant exposing oneself to all the things one was still so afraid of.

Dr Patrick had said she ought to start going home—and so had Martha.

But Martha's outburst just now had been motivated by something else. She had been shaken by what Martha had said.

As she had been shaken once before that afternoon—by the moment on the bridge before the boys appeared. When she and Michael had looked at each other and waited for something to be said. What would it have been—if he'd been allowed to say it? He'd been unusually quiet as they had walked back. She was coming to need and rely on him far too much. That was true—and perhaps he was feeling it, too.

Perhaps he might even welcome the easing up which her going away at week-ends would mean.

She had thought herself to be quite alone in the chapel. A rustling sound from behind made her look round, to find Martin sitting in a pew at the back. Knowing that she saw him, he got up and came forward to sit beside her, and he said in a hushed voice :

"Can I talk to you, Anne?"

"Of course, Martin."

The big Canadian had difficulty in finding words to begin. He sat straightening some torn leaves in a testament on the ledge in front of him before, keeping his tone low because of where they were, he said, "I want to ask your opinion about something that means a lot to me. But before I can, I've got to tell you that I think I despise you. At any rate, I know I don't understand you."

She was astounded. This was Martin—the genial, sunny, big-hearted character that was Martin; who was never heard to say a word against anyone; and he was condemning her.

All she could think of to say in reply was, "But—even if you don't understand somebody—it can't mean you have to despise them."

In the same hushed, reverent whisper he went on, "You are married, you go about all the time with a man who isn't your husband—a coloured man. Today you even got yourself mixed up in a brawl over him, in the canteen. Yet you come here every day to chapel and Bible reading.

"That's what I can't understand—how you can let yourself do that. It's your affair, but I can't talk privately to you about myself without telling you first what I'm thinking. Don't you feel you're a hypocrite?"

Slowly she said, "No—I don't feel I'm a hypocrite. Anyhow—when I think about it—the chapel isn't just for righteous people, is it?"

"I suppose not," he shrugged unhappily. "I do know I feel one myself every time I come in here. Because I'm no good."

"That isn't true."

"Then why is it—" his voice began to shake with emotion, although he still didn't raise its volume, "tell me why it is that I'm always hanging about outside the children's home for Phyllis to come out—yes, the Phyllis in your

ward I see you with a lot—and when she starts out of the door and sees me she goes back inside until I move on? Why is it that whenever I go near her she acts as though I were dirt? There isn't another woman here I'd bother two straws about—but somehow I've got to get her to talk to me. Dirt's just what I expect I must seem like to her. D'you notice I won't take my turn at reading in the mornings when she's here? That's not only because of feeling a hypocrite—it's because I'm afraid of making mistakes in front of her. I'm rough—a big lout—I might read a word wrong. She's little and gentle and had education. But what's so wrong about me that she won't even look at me? I wish I could get her off my mind—I wish she'd be discharged or something—"

His mouth was twisted, his blue eyes deeply hurt as they fixed on the shining brass cross on the altar. They revealed all he must normally be at such pains to conceal. And he was not rough—with his pleasant appearance and natural good manners. He would have to feel very strongly to make the remark he had at the beginning, about despising her, but it was like him to know he must do it. She wanted very much to help him.

"Will it make any difference," she said, softly, "if I say I think you're an awfully grand person, Martin?"

He didn't seem to hear but went on, as though talking to himself, "I was married—to a lovely girl—but however much I tried it didn't seem I could make her happy. She went off with someone else. Since then my life's been empty, but I've never wanted to know another girl—until I saw Phyllis. I only had to see her—Is it wrong to feel you must hang around on the off-chance of just speaking a few words with someone—because she's something you know you've been looking for a long time—and you can't get her out of your mind? I don't mean anything dirty. But I feel dirty—and she's making me feel lower and dirtier—"

He put his elbows on the ledge and his face in his hands.

She sat quietly beside him, longing to think of the right thing to say. A Sister came through the open door with fresh flowers in her arms. She saw them, but the sight of a man in tears was not an unusual one to her, and she passed on along to the altar. She put the flowers on the floor and took the vases outside to replenish the water. Anne waited until she had finished arranging the new blooms, passed back and out through the door again, before she said:

"Would you like me to speak to Phyllis for you?"

"I just want you to tell her I don't mean to bother her any—or be a nuisance. I only want her to talk to me."

"She can't help behaving the way she does, Martin. I know that and I know the reason for it. It's why she's here. I'm not able to tell you about it, but I do ask you to believe that it has nothing whatever to do with you as a person, or the way you are."

Bitterly he took her up. "I sat down next to her at supper yesterday, and from the way she acted you'd think I'd got some sort of disease. She put her knife and fork down without finishing, and shied off before I was properly in my chair. How's a man supposed to feel about that?"

"I've thought of something that could be quite wonderful if you could do it, Martin—and I'm going to do everything I possibly can to help. If you and Phyllis came together you could be the means of changing her whole outlook—everything that makes her have to be here, in hospital. But it would never be easy, because you'd have to take her completely on trust, without understanding any more than you do now."

He looked like a big, bewildered, uncomprehending child, as he said simply, "I would do anything for her, Anne. I don't have to have spoken to her to know that."

"Then this is something we have to plan very carefully, and you must promise to keep to your part. I'm going to talk to her about you as much as I can—until she's so used to the sound of your name that the next step will come

naturally. Then we'll manage to work it so that you and she are near each other whenever possible, and I'll see she doesn't run away.

"But that'll only be the beginning. You must wait until I tell you it's time—and then will come the most difficult part of the whole thing. You mustn't rush her in any way, or be hurt if sometimes she shows she doesn't want you around. You won't have to get too close to her when she does, and you must certainly never touch her. If you do, you can be sure she will shy off, immediately—and that might be the finish. That's a lot to expect from you, when you don't know the reason why it's necessary."

She was getting carried away by wanting so much to help him, and Phyllis. She still kept her voice down because Martin's extreme sense of the fitness of things discouraged the raising of it in chapel, for any reason.

"It must all sound so odd to you. But it is the only way. Once she's got so much confidence in you that she'll wait around for you, I'm certain you'll have a tremendous influence for her good, Martin. Wouldn't that make you feel wonderful? Do you think you can manage to be as patient as you'll have to be? It could take a long time."

He got out his handkerchief and mopped at his neck, and he still looked as puzzled as ever.

The buzzer announcing the hour for supper interrupted them at that point.

They walked together—for the second time that day—into the canteen, to join on at the end of the queue.

Long before they had got to its head her thoughts had reverted to her own problem. She determined that before she went to bed that night she would telephone home, speak to Paul, and arrange to go for the coming week-end.

II

In the pottery shed there were only a few people working quietly and leisurely, which made it very peaceful. Somebody slapped a loaf of smooth, wet clay onto the purring wheel and began fashioning a pot. A man whistled softly under his breath as he set up an easel to paint by a window. Rain poured down, needle-straight, into big puddles by the open doors, which gave onto a yard. A film of grey clay powder lay over everything, softening the angles of hard wooden benches and tables. Except for the therapist, who was painstakingly trying to get Bernie, a new patient, interested in modelling, there was very little talking.

Then the man with the easel stopped whistling.

"Rain Friday—rain Sunday," he observed to the room in general.

"There'll be no match tomorrow if this keeps up," Michael said. And to Anne, who had taken a cigarette from a packet on the bench: "That's the sixth already this afternoon."

"Is it?"

She stubbed it out, agitatedly.

"You don't have to worry—you'll be all right," he said, shortly. "I keep telling you—you'll be fine."

Bernie wasn't taking kindly to clay modelling. He was a stocky, untidy man about thirty years old. That morning he had been sitting on a form outside the canteen while they were all filing in to breakfast, and he'd been crying noisily,

as a child cries. A girl had felt sorry for him and had gone to sit beside him, and he'd put his head down on her lap and continued to cry loudly.

He knocked his chair over as he jumped up impatiently.

"You play with the bloody stuff," he said to the girl therapist, "I've had a belly-full of it already."

"If you find it too difficult, why not go on to something else," she said, with infinite patience. "Would you like to try your hand at some painting?"

"No, I wouldn't like to try my hand at no bloody painting," he mimicked. "I came here to be made well, not to become no bloody painter."

She didn't press him, and he went ambling round the department under the watching eyes of the rest of them. He picked up pieces of finished work left lying about on benches, and commented loudly and coarsely on them all. He was told not to touch the new models set to dry out before baking, but he did just the same. Then he came and straddled the bench where Anne was sitting.

He dropped cigarette ash on the tile she was using as a base and impudently blew it so that it smothered her work. He made an obscene remark about the nude figure of a woman she was putting the finishing touches to, and then his manner changed from cockiness to a whining self-pity as he shuffled along the bench to get right up against her. He started rubbing his face against her neck.

"I'm new," he whimpered. "I'm a new boy here and I'm very unhappy. Will you be nice to me because I'm unhappy?"

He put his hands on her shoulders when she tried to stand up, so that she couldn't move. His breath was sickly. She knew he was ill and she had to get herself away, but she felt helpless—then saw the therapist had risen from her chair and was coming quickly across to deal with Bernie.

On the other side of her Mike slammed down a ball of clay, punched his fist hard into it, ripped off his white

protective coat and walked the length of the room to the door opening onto the corridor.

She extricated herself from Bernie, who was now waving his arms and threatening the therapist, and without waiting to remove her own smock she went after Michael. She could see him at the far end of the passage, leaning against a door and staring out into the wet. He must have heard her steps as she came up behind him, but he took no notice.

"Mike," she put her hand on his arm. "What's the matter?"

He shook her off roughly, without replying.

In an hour or so she would be leaving for the week-end.

"All right, Mike," she said, "I'll be back Sunday night. I'll see you then."

She turned to walk away and he said sharply:

"No."

She waited while he caught her up, and saw how drawn his face was, with the black scowl in his eyes again.

"Come outside with me. I want to talk to you."

It was still pouring with rain as they walked across the courtyard and the playing field towards the cricket pavilion at the far side. Her heels sank into the squelchy turf. She had nothing on her head and water was running off her hair and down her collar by the time they reached cover.

The place reeked of damp as they crossed the threshold, the rain was rattling on the iron roof. He pulled her right into the shelter and held her against him. His fingers, when he fastened them in her hair, were still white with clay, and he turned her face up to his and covered it with urgent, hungry kisses. Rain ran down off his own head. She could hardly breathe and her neck hurt where he strained her head back, but he went on and on kissing her, until at last he gasped out:

"That swine just now—that swine— Touching you—"

Her arms were round him and she could feel the tension

shaking his body. But his hands relaxed a little and gently she drew them down from her head.

"I should have hit him— But I knew that if I started—I had to keep a hold—I didn't dare because I might not have been able to stop."

"He's ill, Michael. You don't have to think about Bernie."

There was a plastic groundsheet hanging on a peg. She reached out, unhooked it and let it drop to the floor. They sat on the sheet and she held him, quietly, until his body went slack. Then he looked up and kissed her mouth, once.

"Well, at least you know—that's some relief. But you knew already, didn't you? We'd better get this wet smock off you."

He helped her pull her arms clear of the sleeves.

"What do you want us to do, Michael? "

"I want you to love me like I love you—that's what I want. Aside from that—what is to be done? "

"Would you rather we didn't see so much of each other? "

"God forbid! Please, darling—I'll go right to pieces again if that happens. Besides," he smiled ruefully, "we haven't completed your own cure yet. You couldn't do without me."

"No," she said, seriously. "You're quite right. I don't know whether I can do without you."

They sat on silently, he smoking and she watching the stationary, leaden clouds and the heavy cocoa-coloured ridges being churned up in the soil outside

"Of course I know," he said at last, "that it wasn't really Bernie's behaviour which made me blow up just now. I know that what's getting at me is the thought of you going home to your husband tonight. That's a beautifully unlawful statement I haven't the least right to make—but it's true. I have to see you go to him for two nights now, and soon for always—and I can't ever have you."

Minutes went by, and then she said, "Michael—the thing

I want most in the whole world is to have my children again. And I get very frightened because they seem as remote from me, caught up in this frightful prison my own mind builds round me, as yours are from you by distance. There's an appalling sixth sense which keeps telling me, with more conviction than any instinct I've ever known before, that no matter how I try I'm not going to be allowed to get back to them. Not right back. And that certainty is there—just below the surface—every minute of the day and it ousts every other feeling."

"Can't you manage to believe what I'm always telling you? That's a state of mind you've built up with your illness. You still are ill in that kind of way, or they wouldn't be keeping you here. All that will pass with time."

He finished his cigarette and pitched it out into the rain, before he went on: "Did you notice you only talked about your children just then?"

"Because—about Paul I'm even more confused. I can't tell what my real feelings for him are now. There have been times this past year when I've hated him because he wasn't there and couldn't understand how much I needed him. I wanted to hear him say, just once: 'But I know my wife better than anyone. She isn't really self-centred and demanding, and childish and sly. If she behaves like that it's because there must be something very wrong with her, and someone has got to do something about it.'

"But he never said anything like that. He treated me like a naughty child who mustn't on any account be allowed to get away with it, and he let other people treat me that way. Yet I remember how much I used to love him, and I ask myself—why don't I feel the love coming back now I'm better? Why can't I reach out to him again? But I can't make his life and mine come together at all. We're on two different planes."

It seemed already to be getting dusk outside, with the damp drifting across the field and hanging under the trees.

"Sweetheart," he said, "I think this week-end could decide a lot for you. And I'm not going to make things more difficult—I'll wait until you're clearer. But whatever does happen—I'm always going to be glad, even if I had to get ill, that I came to England and this place, because it meant that I knew you."

He held her closely to him before he let her get up. Then he took off his jacket and put it round her shoulders.

"Do you know," he said, "that back home where I come from we have three hundred days a year of sunshine? Three hundred continuous days—"

The drive home took them a little over an hour and a half. Paul was in very good spirits. He had been overjoyed to get her message that she was able to come for week-end leave. On the way he told her he had taken all three children to his mother's so that they could be alone. But if she wanted them and it wouldn't be too much for her, he could go any time and get them back.

The house looked strange. Smaller—although actually as a house it was big and inconvenient to run, with too many steps up and down to different levels, and passages it was always a trial to keep warm in winter. Trees screened it right off from the road, heavy beeches and conifers—a large part of their four acres was woodland—and they were all dismally dripping steadily from the rain.

There were two gabled rooms in the roof. One was used as a playroom, and the other Paul had lately had done up as a sitting-room for the housekeeper. They had a daily woman who came on a bicycle twice a week, but it had always been difficult to keep anyone, especially a young girl living-in, because the place was old and lonely, and the nearest town was three miles, with a long walk to the 'bus stop.

There were one or two differences outside from the last time she had seen it—that was almost five months, counting the time spent in the nursing-home before she had gone on to Highfield. New white palings had been put along their

boundary with the road and up the side of the garden, to separate it from the drive. That was to keep children and pets from straying, and also so that the car could be driven straight in from the road without Paul having to get out and open gates, which he always found so irksome.

She indicated a 'Beware of the Dog' plaque set into the wall by the front door. It showed a drawing of a ferocious, toothy mastiff.

Paul laughed. "That is to do with the surprise the boys have for you. I wasn't to tell you anything about it until you saw for yourself."

The surprise was two squirming, outrageously fat and unferocious pugs, eight weeks old, a black and a tan. They dug their nails into the bottom of Paul's trousers in welcome, dragging threads in his good suit, and he shook them off.

"I can't stand the senseless little brutes myself," he said. "If I have a dog at all it has to be a decent size. But the children were keen to have them and Miss Bream dotes on little dogs, so it seemed a good idea. At least there's more to them than the rabbits."

The housekeeper appeared from the kitchen to be introduced. She seemed ill at ease about meeting her employer's wife on her first visit home after a mental breakdown. She said she hoped Anne would have a pleasant week-end, and would she be sure to ask if there was anything she needed, and that the meal was ready when they were. Then she retreated at once back to her stove.

While Paul was putting the car away Anne picked up her case and went on up the stairs to her bedroom. Again it was all so strange—like a room she was seeing for the first time and which hadn't yet decided whether to welcome or reject her. It was sumptuous, compared to the austerity she was living in now. The bed enormous—deep and soft and luxurious. There was carpet under her feet for the first time for months, the brocade curtains at the two

windows hung extravagantly from the ceiling to the floor. But there was nothing to make it personal to her. She couldn't feel—yet, anyhow—she had arrived somewhere where she belonged.

Paul came upstairs, two at a time, after her. He had a rather gauche, 'boyish way of lifting his shoulders and advancing on her with his arms spread wide, before hugging her.

"Oh," he said, "this is good."

He kept himself fit always with exercise and being outdoors a great deal, and he looked younger than the thirty-five years he was. His hair had gone a little farther back at the temples, making his forehead broader than it had been, but otherwise it grew thick and strong and almost black. He was keen on sport, had already taught the boys to ride and swim passably well, and he enjoyed turning out for the village cricket team whenever he was at home on Saturday afternoons. Paul was an uncomplicated person. He liked life to bowl along in as undisturbed a fashion as possible, easily getting ruffled when routine was upset for any reason, or last minute alterations made to plans he had mapped out to his satisfaction.

"This is wonderful," he said again, "and it's going to be a lovely week-end. You shall do just as you please, but we're not going to mention anything like hospitals or being ill to spoil it, are we?"

While they had dinner he talked a lot about friends and neighbours, and answered her questions about his work briefly, because he'd always held the view that his job was his responsibility; he never wanted her to feel she had to concern herself about it. It left them with longish, awkward silences, since there was nothing much on her side which she could tell him.

She wished the children had been kept at home. Apart from the fact that she wanted to see them very badly, they would have provided a buffer against awkward silences

like that. But she didn't want to upset his arrangements and decided that she would wait until tomorrow before suggesting they should be brought back.

When the meal was finished she went into the kitchen to talk to Miss Bream. The housekeeper was a neat, woolly fifty-something, with hair which was inclined to be frizzy, and unblinking pale-grey eyes behind very thick spectacles. An ungainliness when she moved revealed that she had the misfortune to have one leg shorter than the other, so that when she stood still one foot rested on its toe while the other was flat on the floor. Anne was concerned to see how the two dogs were constantly getting under her feet.

"Aren't they a nuisance to you? We could have them put somewhere else whilst you're working, if you'd rather."

"Oh no," Miss Bream took her up quickly in a way which could mean she resented what might have been an illusion to her disability. "They only do it because they love me so much—don't you my precious? They want their little something extra nice, before they go bye-bye. And they shall have it, because they've been such good little one-ies!"

She had taken her hands out of the washing-up water, picked up both the animals, rubbed their noses against her own, and was holding them so that they could help themselves to titbits left on one of the plates. Anne's eyes widened in surprise at the unexpected lapse into baby-talk. She frowned, but stopped herself making a spontaneous protest, and picked up a tea-towel to dry the glasses.

"Don't bother at all," said Miss Bream. "I'm used to it. If you're only here for two days you don't need to do any work."

"But I should like to have some time with you," Anne said. "After all—you're looking after my family. I feel I should know you more."

Again Miss Bream seemed to take instant exception to

the remark, or at any rate to misinterpret it. She dropped the dogs to the floor at once, and pulled herself upright.

"Well," she said, primly. "Mr Lester had two references when I came—very good ones. I'm sure I can't think what else you want."

"Miss Bream—I didn't mean that at all. It's just that I would like to know you personally; to be friends with you; to thank you for looking after my husband and the children."

"Oh, I see." Mollified, she went back to the washing up and spoke over her shoulder. "I do my best and I hope it's satisfactory. You have a lovely home and family, if I may say so, Mrs Lester. I like being here—it suits me. I always believe in people counting their blessings. If they did that a bit more they wouldn't have time to imagine they had all sorts of things wrong with them."

They didn't seem to be getting anywhere. Anne finished the drying, then went into the sitting-room, where Paul was. It was half past nine. Suddenly she felt drained of energy, and exhausted.

"It's almost my bedtime," she smiled at him. "and I do feel a bit tired. Would you mind if I went to bed?"

"Of course not. An early night will do me good as well. You go and I'll be up soon."

She paused before she went through the door.

"Did you know that Miss Bream calls the dogs her precious one-ies and lets them eat off our plates?"

"Does she?" he frowned. "Oh well—I suppose the plates are going to be washed. For Christ's sake don't say anything to upset her, Anne—she can be touchy."

She stood by a window in the bedroom, looking out across the lush, overweight garden. The rain had stopped at last, but the heavy clouds had brought on darkness too soon. There was no other building in sight.

It was all so quiet—outside, and within the house. She would give a lot to hear a child cry out. There had been

this same longing in the dead quiet when she'd stood by this window night after night before Debbie was born, when Paul was in South Africa, and she'd been alone with the two little boys. She'd kept on flushing the cistern in the lavatory to make some noise—any noise. A few months later, when he'd had to make another trip, the vigil by the window each night had gone on again, because of the obsession which had got a grip on her that something was going to happen to the children whilst she had sole responsibility for them. Or to herself—so that they would be left with no one.

If she did go to sleep she would wake with a start, smelling fire downstairs. Traffic on the roads, when they were out walking, was the worst. It raced towards her—the wheels raced towards her always, with the express intention of destroying her, so that after a while she would cringe against walls and hedges in panic, sweating and not being able to breathe. They were unreasonable and unfounded fears, and therefore it was impossible to tell them to anyone—they must be kept to herself. But they had grown, until she wouldn't let the children out of her sight for even a few minutes, or relax her vigil by sleeping at all. And finally it had been fear of having even to see the wheels, of going outside at all, of going from one room to another—

She was being foolish—asking for trouble—to dwell on all that. Resolutely she ran a bath and got ready for bed. She found the pillbox with the right number of drugs to cover her two days' leave, issued by the hospital, swallowed the sleeping capsule and got into bed. By the time Paul came up it had worked and she was sleeping heavily.

The next day she told him she would like to have the children home.

"All right," he said, "if that's what you want. I had hoped we might go out—perhaps to town or to a show. Or what about us both going over and seeing them at

mother's? Then we could go on somewhere afterwards."

"No," she said. "Do you mind—I would rather not go anywhere. I'll stay here while you fetch them."

He took Miss Bream with him, to drop her off at the shops, and Anne roamed restlessly around the house, waiting.

There was a shyness about facing the children again, although really she was longing for them. She hadn't seen Debbie for the whole of the five months, and the boys only once or twice.

The few times they had visited her at Highfield they had always wanted to know why Mummy stayed in that place, when she wasn't in bed so she couldn't be ill any more. Why wouldn't she come back home to them? They must have been told something—must have had their questions answered in some way by Paul, or by Miss Bream. What had been the answers, and what were their own private thoughts about her? Weighing heavily was the memory of the time when she hadn't been able to fight any longer, and had broken down in front of them. Coming after all that odd behaviour they'd seen her get up to, would they ever be able to forget her screaming and her panic? She remembered the slow, shocked tears down little Pip's cheeks as he'd been taken out of the house that dreadful morning before the ambulance came to take her to the nursing-home. There was so much she had to make up to them for.

At the sound of a car outside she rushed to a window. Nikky and Pip were with Paul, but Debbie wasn't there. She flew downstairs as they came in at the door.

"Where's Debbie? Is she ill? Why didn't you bring her?"

"No—take it easy. Of course she's not ill, but she has got a cold and mother thought it best for her to stay indoors."

"But—it's so mild—it wouldn't have hurt her unless she

has a temperature. Didn't your mother realize how much I wanted to see her? "

They hung back in their best clothes, uncomfortable and uncertain quite how to greet her. Nicholas, a serious little boy, old for his eight years; and Philip, five, who inspected her with big brown eyes, his mouth with the funny little gap where his two top front teeth had gone, shyly smiling.

The very last thing she must do was to let them see how nervous she was of them.

"Darlings—"

She went to them and down on her knees to put her arms round them, and they hugged and kissed her. The dogs appeared from the back of the house, pushed themselves in, and made an excellent means of breaking the ice.

"You both look so smart—new coats. But why not your jeans and jerseys—it's Saturday? "

"Granny said we had to look nice for your visit. She said it didn't matter after you'd gone again."

"Oh—that's silly, isn't it? I'm not a visitor. I'm your Mummy."

"That's what I said—that we'd been untidy millions of times when you'd seen us—I thought you ought to get used to seeing us untidy again."

"What do you think of the puppies? "

"They're sweet."

"Only I still like my rabbits," Pip said, loyally. "Only Nikky and Miss Bream wanted the puppies, so I said all right. Daddy says you've only come until tomorrow. Why aren't you going to stay home now? "

"Stop it, Pip," Nikky shut him up. "You know you're not to worry about that."

"What about Debbie? She must be big. Is she walking nicely? "

Pip was scornful.

"Yes—she's walking."

"She keeps walking off with his toys. Dad says she's a

dictator—if she can't have what she wants she screams until someone gives it to her."

Miss Bream had returned and came into the hall from the kitchen.

"Now then, Nikky and Pip. Are you bothering your mother? Why don't you take off your coats and go outside to play?"

They stopped chattering instantly and drew back, looking uncertain again, and far too clean.

"Of course they're not bothering me. Look—I'll come out with you and we'll give the puppies a run in the garden."

They walked sedately, one on each side of her.

"We've made a tree house. Dad helped us."

"I don't like her," that was Pip. "When you come home to stay will she go away?"

"It's a wonderful tree house. Pip—suppose you and Nikky have your tea in it today, and Daddy and I'll have ours underneath?"

"That will be nice. But will she go when you come back to stay?"

"I don't know just yet, Pip. Perhaps—not quite at once."

"I don't like her. I don't like the look of her, especially if she comes in my room at night. She doesn't wear peejamas, she wears a pee-nightie. It comes right down to the floor."

"You don't say 'pee-nightie'—it's just 'nightie' by itself. And you know Dad says we've got to like Miss Bream because no one else will come to look after us."

They all had lunch and were together for the afternoon. There were moments when it seemed that reserve was really breaking down at last, and then the outspoken Pip would make some remark, Nikky would look concernedly at Anne, and shush him immediately. They seemed to have been drilled in some way to prevent them getting into any kind of emotional contact with her.

Whenever Miss Bream was around she kept up her perpetual 'Stop worrying your mother— Don't worry— Didn't we all agree that we weren't going to worry your mother?' It was exasperating.

She might just as well have gone the whole way and added: 'We all know she was crazy a few months ago. That she may still be inclined to be crazy. No one must upset or aggravate her because we can't be quite sure how she's likely to act—'

Then Paul's mother appeared unexpectedly, and brought with her his two sisters and their husbands. She said that Debbie's cold was no worse, but she had been left behind with Paul's father.

They made quite a party, and their greetings were the reverse of reticent. They all over-played: 'Of course this call is no different from any other. Anne is really quite normal. Nothing more than a little overstrain—a little worry, perhaps. Nothing remotely resembling anything like a mental breakdown would ever happen to anyone in this family. We must act as though nothing at all had gone wrong.'

But, after the greetings were over, they immediately proceeded to treat her like an invalid.

She wasn't allowed to lay a cloth or get out the tea things. They talked all the time—brightly and trivially, like conversation you are careful to make when you visit a friend who is unlucky enough to be in hospital, and must on no account be allowed to suspect that you are yourself carrying on a full and productive life. If Anne showed signs of debating a point, or seemed inclined to argue, they maddeningly reversed their own opinions and she was left high and dry, ready for discussion but not allowed to discuss.

The attentiveness and the wariness grew more irritating and frustrating. She wondered what they would do if she did pick up the teapot and empty it over someone's head. They were all so satisfied with themselves that she felt

sorry for them. Compared to the strength of views, and variety of topics, and depths of conversation explored by Martha and some of the others, these well-meaning people were colourless. What would Martha—at her own home and all alone—be doing this afternoon? What would Michael be doing now? It had been a fine day after all, so the match would be on and he'd be playing. Last Saturday she had gone into the village and bought a picnic tea whilst his side was fielding, and they had sat eating it at the edge of the field after he'd had his turn to bat and been caught out.

She realized that Paul's mother was watching her, and so were his sisters. Cups needed refilling. She went to pick up the pot, saw how her hand was shaking, and left it to someone else.

Soon after tea they all went, taking the boys with them. Nikky and Pip said a controlled goodbye, and went quietly away with their grandmother.

The week-end was neither a complete success nor a total failure. It had certainly been a strain—for all of them. But they had got through it, and next time could be much easier.

On the way back to the hospital on Sunday evening, Paul said, "Darling—I've come to realize something which I think is very important. I can see now how isolated and out of the way the house really is. It must have been ghastly for you alone there so many months at a time. And you'd never let me ask mother to stay with you."

"How could you? She has your father—she couldn't have stayed long anyway."

"The thing is—if you feel you couldn't stand it again, I'll look for somewhere else. I've always liked the place myself—I admit I'd be sorry to leave, and there'd be all the upheaval to go through. But I'd be willing to sell out and start again if it would mean you'd be happier. Would you mind having to cope with the chaos of moving, or shall I

see if I can find a place quickly and get it all over before you come home? "

She reflected.

" Will you let me think about it? It's a new idea which hadn't occurred to me—and I think it's made me feel a lot better. I know I can't bear the house, Paul. It's not only the loneliness—it reminds me of all that happened— "

" Well, don't you worry, darling. I'll go into it all, see what I can expect to get for the property, and look at some others. When I find anything I think you'll like I'll take you to see it. Now then—hasn't that given you something to think about? I'm beginning to get excited at the idea myself. And it wasn't so bad—coming back to your husband, was it? "

" Of course not."

" Next time you'll be better still. You won't have to feel any strain at all, and then we'll start counting the days to your coming home for good."

She said, as they drew up at the hospital door :

" Paul, I want to say—thank you for being so patient."

He kissed her.

" I'm not going to stay patient for long. I want my wife—just as she used to be—wanting me as much as she ever did. You keep on thinking about that as well. I'll be expecting you to 'phone me during the week about picking you up next Friday."

She watched the car grow small and remote as it went from her on its way along the road to the gate. Then she stood and let her gaze roam over the entire range of the hospital buildings; and she remained looking, wondering at herself. This was the place she had hated so much not very long ago. Not for itself perhaps, though it was unattractive enough, but for everything about her own self that having to be here implied. This time, however, there was quite a different feeling. Was it—almost a feeling of coming home—?

The hands of the clock showed eight-thirty. She went in and upstairs to her ward. It was empty as yet, although the others would soon be crowding in for the night. She had just unpacked the few things from her week-end case, and put them away in her locker, when Joan burst in.

"Oh—I am glad someone's here," she said, breathlessly. "Pauline's in the lift with a couple of the men. Will you come and help me smuggle her into bed?"

The lift was only supposed to be used by patients who couldn't walk up the stairs, and that certainly applied to Pauline at that moment, because there was no doubt at all that she was drunk. As they transferred her limp arms from around the necks of the two men, who shouldn't have been anywhere near that part of the building, to themselves, she was giggling helplessly, her head lolling, her feet splaying like a new-born giraffe.

"The kid's not used to it," Joan said. "It was her first evening out with us. I never dreamed she'd get like this."

Pauline was only twenty. She adored her husband and two babies, and longed for the day when she could get back to them. She had been very ill for months, and it was only recently that she had started going out in the evenings at all.

They rushed her from the lift to the washroom, where she detached herself and made a dive for the lavatory bowl. She sat on the floor, with her arms hugging it, and was sick. When they had managed to prise her away from the bowl and get her across the corridor and into the ward, they pulled off her clothes and rolled her into bed.

"Now stop your noise, love, and keep down with your eyes closed," said Joan. "You're off sleeping pills, so pretend to be asleep and you'll be all right in the morning."

They anchored the waving arms under the blankets, tucked her in tight up to her chin, and turned away, congratulating themselves on having successfully shielded young Pauline from trouble. It would have been real

trouble. Excessive drinking was dealt with severely, not only because of the breaking of rules, but because alcohol and drugs could be highly dangerous in combination.

But then Pauline pushed back the bedclothes, sat up and shouted after them, and that was her undoing.

"You have to promise me you won't tell Bob," she yelled. "Don't tell my Bob I was drunk. Bob—I only had three little light ales, honest I did. Don't be mad at me—Bob—"

They smothered her again, but it was too late. The nurse had heard the shouting from next door, and she was in at once. She lifted Pauline's eyelid, gave clucks of exasperation, and pulled screens round the bed. There were more bowls, and much sobbing from behind the screens. The others were drifting in now. They all felt sorry for Pauline, and expected she would be sacked in the morning.

"Remember that other Ann, and Jenny?" Bridget said, "When they had too much to drink because it was Jenny's birthday? On the way back they took a red lamp from the railway station, and it's hang it up outside the door here they did. Then they kicked up the very devil of a racket with their singing 'Underneath the Lamplight'. Sure—and we never saw them again after breakfast the next morning."

"But Pauline's never given any trouble before, and everyone likes her," said Phyllis. "I think they'll let her off this time, with a warning"

Pauline finally went to sleep, and everyone settled down for the night.

Home seemed very far away, and unreal, again.

The next morning, immediately after breakfast, there was an inquiry stemming from the night nurse's report on Pauline's escapade, and Anne and Joan were summoned to give their excuses for trying to conceal her condition from authority.

By the time Anne got round to the chapel the Bible-reading session had almost finished. They had read the whole of Ecclesiastes Three, and Phyllis was singing a hymn, unaccompanied. Her voice was very sweet and clear. Anne looked for Martin, before moving to the place left vacant for her beside Mike, but the burly figure of the Canadian was not among the dozen or so patients assembled that morning.

Mike smiled a welcome, and gave her his book to share. They all sang the last verse together, then the man who was their leader said an impromptu prayer, and the meeting broke up.

"I was wondering what could have happened to you," Michael said as they went through the door. "Was afraid you'd decided not to come back at all last night."

"We had some trouble over Pauline. She'd been out with some of the others and had too much to drink, and Joan and I thought we'd got her safely to bed and no one need know. But there was a fuss and we had to wait and be lectured this morning. But all is sweetness and light once again. She's been given another chance."

It was a lovely, exhilarating, sunny morning. Mike waited until they were sitting in the 'White Cockatoo' and had ordered their coffee before he said:

"How was it?"

"I wasn't very good, Mike."

"You couldn't expect to be—the first time."

"I felt so dreadfully inadequate—so unnecessary, and no one would let me try to do a thing. They were all so careful with me. The children—it was as though I was a stranger they'd been told to be on their best behaviour with. It's not the same as going home from hospital after pneumonia or a broken leg, when everyone is just thankful it's over and done with, and you carry on where you left off. This is something with no definite finish, it trails along with you, it may never finish completely. One is always going to remember and re-live it all whenever some situation brings it back."

"Nonsense. Your whole time here will have been wasted if you insist on thinking like that."

"But it is so, Mike. All over the place there are things to make you remember, however much you try to forget. They're hostile—when once you thought they were friendly. Here it's the other way round—things which horrified you at first become understanding and welcoming. I found myself counting—'only so many more hours and then I shall be going back'. And that's a terrible thing, because this is an institution, and I've always hated it so much."

"The great thing is you managed to keep it to yourself. Don't always be analysing your feelings, or wondering why you did this or that. Just remember that you've made a start. Now—guess what happened to me. Something exciting. I met a man I used to know back home—who was at college with me."

"Really Michael? Has he come here—to be at the hospital?"

"No—this was in the town, at a lecture I went to. There was a woman missionary talking about Central Africa. He and I arrived on the doorstep at the same moment. Wasn't that extraordinary? He's working near here and he's renting a flat. I went back with him and we had a wonderful time, just talking and reminiscing. Did you know that you can apply for a late pass and, provided the doc O.K.s it, you don't have to report in until eleven? I'm going to see Simon again soon, and you're coming too. You have no idea how good it felt to be in a private apartment, after never being able to get away from people for so long.

"And that brings up something else, darling. I'm beginning to feel I must get right away—and start working again."

"Away? "

"It's done me so much good being here—you've done me so much good. It's weeks since I had any suggestion of the paralysis, and I feel so fit I can't believe it could ever come back. I'll be guided by the doctor, of course. But there's no doubt, darling, a man feeling as good as I do can't just go on like this, doing no work at all."

"Have you any definite plans?" she asked.

"Well—as I told you—I wanted more than anything else to teach, and that still goes. It's what I studied for and I know I could do it. The trouble is, I wasn't able to finish the course. That means I haven't got the necessary qualifications, so I might have difficulty in finding a school that would take me and, if I did, it could be anywhere in the country. If there's no chance at all with that, I'll try for accountancy, or something with figures. I did it for years—there's no snag about that."

She sat silently, sipping her coffee. The cockatoo said something, indistinguishable.

"What's the matter? You're not still brooding over the week-end? It would be quite crazy to expect everything to

be right the very first time out. You've been pretty sick this year."

"It's not that, Michael. I'm realizing that one day—quite soon now, perhaps—you're not going to be here. It's come up on us suddenly."

"If it's sudden it's only because we wouldn't acknowledge it before," he said, gently. "And it has to come eventually, Anne. We both know that, don't we? Do you suppose I don't constantly think about it, and wonder—" He broke off.

"What were you going to say?"

"Never mind. It's far too nice a morning for moodiness, and far too nice to go back for O.T. I've found a lovely spot I want to take you to—and there should be a train due in about twenty minutes."

"A train?"

"Yes—it's a couple of stations down the line."

"A train! Mike—I haven't been in a train—I get such an awful feeling—Honestly, I'm serious about this, Mike. It's something that haunts me—trains—and wheels—I couldn't go by train."

Her face showed her distress.

"Anne—sweetheart—" he said, firmly, "we're going to do something about this. You're coming with me; we find an empty compartment; we have the windows down, and you won't panic. It's one of the nicest ways of travelling through the country. You go and buy some lunch for us and I'll slip back for a few things. Then you won't have to show up until your rest period and afternoon tablets."

When he rejoined her after an interval he was carrying a brown-paper parcel.

"This is meant to look like my laundry. It's a blanket for you to sit on. I whipped it off the nearest bed to the door when no one was looking. Can you imagine the inquest that's going on now over a bed with one blanket reported absent without leave?"

He kept her laughing and the train was already standing in the station, so there was no question of her having to watch it come. And it was a lovely place he had found. They climbed until they were high up on the Berkshire Downs, overlooking a flatter stretch of country where a string of racehorses were out exercising. The muffled thud of the hooves came up to them as the horses galloped across and into the distance. There was a circle of little girls and boys on ponies, round their teacher, being instructed in dressage. All were dwarfed by the height, and there was very little other movement in all the miles of country laid out below them.

Mike shook out the blanket and spread it where a belt of thick hawthorn screened them from a stiff breeze. Then he lit a cigarette for her.

In spite of the lovely morning and the beauty all around them, the sense of deep depression which had started in the café persisted. The 'Highfield Hospital', worked in red cotton on a corner of the grey blanket, worried her. She folded it under so that the words were hidden, and he promptly turned it up again.

"What's the use of trying to hide something unpleasant? It's still there, however much you cover it up."

He produced a book from his pocket.

"Just relax, and I'll read you something I like very much."

"It's going to rain soon."

"What are you talking about? It's beautiful."

She indicated the sky behind them, where a bank of dark cloud was building up and moving steadily in their direction.

"Oh, that. It'll miss us. Back home we have three hundred days completely unbroken sunshine. Or did I tell you that before?"

"It's going to rain here—in England—this very morning."

"Stop all this preoccupation with your weather, and a

whole lot of other things, and tell me who you think wrote this."

He stretched out at full length beside her where she lay, her chin in her hands, watching his long, sensitive, brown fingers finding the page.

" ' A snake came to my water-trough
On a hot, hot day, and I in pyjamas for the heat,
To drink there.

In the deep, strange-scented shade of the great,
dark carob-tree.
I came down the steps with my pitcher
And must wait, must stand and wait, for there he
was at the trough before me.' "

He looked at her expectantly.

" I don't know, but I love it."

He finished the poem.

" Well, ignoramus, it was D. H. Lawrence."

" No? His snake is so much nicer than his gamekeeper! "

He went on reading, absorbing himself in the poetry. She listened to the words, and to his voice, which she had always taken a delight in hearing when he read like this. It was very quiet, they were very close together.

But their closeness was going to finish.

Any day now—any day—he might go away, and she knew that if he went without her she wasn't going to be able to bear it.

Because he would take from her something that had to be there, something she needed always, and for which there couldn't ever be any substitute.

You couldn't cut out the element which had become so much a part of you that it held you together, and with his going something vital and necessary like that would be torn right out of her

He had come—miraculously he'd been there, right in her path—at a time when it had seemed certain that nothing and no one was ever going to be able to help her—when she had longed for her life to be finished, and loathed herself for lacking the courage to finish it. From half-way across the world, from a different way of life, with a different coloured skin—he had been there. And he'd shown her the way back.

There must be an end of pretence. Not that it had been pretence—she'd never deliberately deluded herself. It was evasion—and now she was going to stop evading. This was love she had for him—great love—and she wanted to go with him and share whatever the future held for him.

Whatever it was, it wasn't going to be easy. She would only be evading the issue again if she imagined otherwise. He had nothing now. He had to start from scratch, after illness, with possibly prejudice to overcome because of his colour. But she could work herself, she wouldn't mind what she did, how hard it was, so long as they could take it together.

She was in love with him, and there was a great relief in admitting it unreservedly to herself at last.

But there was other knowledge she had to admit, at the same time: of what else she would be doing; of relinquishing loyalty and duty, and about the hurt she was going to cause to people who didn't deserve to be hurt. Those ties would pull strongly the other way, against this new life she would be planning, and make everything harder still. But they couldn't alter the fact that she loved this man beside her.

He felt her eyes on him and looked up. She stopped trying to work it all out, reached over and took the book out of his hand.

"Oh, Michael," she said, "what am I going to do?"

He didn't ask, this time, what she was talking about. He reached out his arms, and she went into them.

A little later on, she said, "Do you think we can stay here all day? Do we have to go back? Can't we have this whole day alone up here?"

"If you can think of a good story to tell your Dragon about why you missed your medicine."

"I don't need their medicine any more. You're all I need—and I've got you. Saying it so simply makes me feel blissfully uncomplicated."

He laughed. "Shall I tell you something? You were right about the rain."

The black clouds had come up right over them, and big drops were already falling.

"It's only local, but it's going to be heavy whilst it lasts, and there's not much shelter."

He helped her up and into what cover the bushes afforded, wrapping the blanket round her to keep her dry. The red lettering was in front of her again, branding her, but this time it didn't bother her. He had his arms round her, holding the blanket in place.

"How do you suppose I'm going to get this thing back on Bill's bed without being seen, especially now it'll be wet?"

"Three hundred days unbroken sunshine! Don't you wish you were back home, Michael?"

"No," he said. "You know that I don't. Give me a grey, squally, impossible English summer day on the Berkshire Downs—with a woman I'm very much in love with."

Going back in the train they again had a compartment to themselves. They had passed one station and were very near to getting off at the next, when she thought of something.

"What are you and I going to do about Phyllis and Martin?"

He didn't reply immediately, so she went on, "You remember I told you how Martin talked, in the chapel the other day? It's a wonderful opportunity to do something to help both of them, Mike. I'd like them to be as happy

together as we are. Except they've so much farther to go. I can handle Phyllis, I think, though it'll have to be very carefully and slowly—and we can make every opportunity of throwing them together without upsetting her too much. I do hope he can be patient—”

“Wait—wait a minute,” Mike said. “There's something I've got to tell you ”

He pulled his arms from round her and gently took hold of her hands.

“Anne—Martin is dead.”

She drew back from him, staring, frozen, unable to grasp what he was saying.

“Martin is dead, Anne. He turned out with the rest of us for the match on Saturday, but he collapsed in the pavilion before it started.”

Martin—the cricket pavilion?

“He can't be— He's so big—and strong— He just can't be—”

“There was nothing physically wrong. They found an empty bottle in his pocket. They got to work on him at once, but it seems he'd taken too many. He never became conscious again.”

Martin—dead!

“But I can't believe that he ever would— Yes—I can. After the other evening, in the chapel. Poor Martin! Where could he have got so many? They keep such a strict watch on drugs.”

“Hoarded them—or managed to get them from outside. God knows! He was so likeable, wasn't he? Weren't they talking about it in your ward last night? The whole place was buzzing on Saturday.”

“No—but then we were too occupied with Pauline, and this morning there was no chance. Oh, Michael—we liked him, but he was hating himself. Why didn't he wait—?”

The train pulled in at the platform, and in a daze she stepped down after him.

"There's one thing certain—you won't ever have to let Phyllis know how he felt about her."

"Because if she connected it with her attitude towards him she might come to believe she was to blame? That would be too dreadful."

"I wish now, I hadn't told you. You were so happy."

"Michael, darling—I still am happy. It's terribly sad—unnecessary and a terrible tragedy. But about us I can't help being so happy. Can you understand? I'm walking along this road—towards the hospital. Happiness is the very last sensation I ever expected to experience on this road or in sight of this hospital—and the very last thing I would ever have dreamed could come to me out of the way I was earlier this year—when, if only I'd had the courage, I'd have done what Martin has. It's so strange. When you aren't expecting something—that's the time it drops plonk into your lap, and for a long while you can't recognize it, because you weren't looking for it."

As it happened, no one did mention Martin's suicide to her. After the news had exploded throughout the whole hospital, other news, other events, concern for one's own affairs, had diminished its importance. It was only a few of them who went on remembering him.

It was Wednesday, the mid-week visitors' day, and once again Dr Patrick had called her in for their weekly interview.

"Well now," he was cheerful. "You're very much better. In fact, I'd say you're looking remarkably well."

"Oh yes—very much."

"Can we put this amazing difference between now and last week down to your week-end? Is it an indication that we can soon think about sending you home altogether?"

"I was—much better than I thought I'd be. I just wish that more things would come right."

"What sort of things?"

"Like—finding it simple to do the ordinary actions one has to do every day of one's life—without thinking about the having to do them. Going any distance at all, or any place, with absolute confidence. Not having to be afraid that the old panic might suddenly get loose all over again. Having to fight it when it does begin to take hold—"

"That's just it. I have the humiliation of knowing that something or other, aren't there?"

"That's just it. I have the humiliation of knowing that they do—and I gave way. I shocked my children—I made them suffer—"

He made the longest speech she'd ever heard from him at any one time.

"It doesn't necessarily indicate inferiority or lack of

courage when a person breaks down completely. It can be quite a trivial matter which triggers off eventual collapse, but always behind it there is something very much deeper. A long succession of difficulties, childhood fears, frustrations—insecurity, perhaps of many years standing. And suddenly life becomes just too much. The causes of your breakdown are always going to be there—you'll know about them. It's the degree to which you can adjust your attitude to them which is important. Now you've made a start, I want you to get home as much as possible."

He closed her file, which meant he wanted her to go. But as she was getting off the couch he said:

"By the way—who is the patient you're very friendly with, in D.5?"

She hesitated, suddenly wanting very much to have him know about herself and Michael. But there was no time left to make him understand—

"All right," he said, "if you don't want to talk about it, it will keep. But go home as much as you can. You've reached a stage when it's very necessary to break away from hospital associations. However, we won't jeopardize everything by rushing over the last lap. You've done extremely well, but there's a little way to go yet."

She went out, uncertain whether the interview had reassured or depressed her. In the corridor outside the doctor's room a little nurse from the ward was waiting.

"Sister told me to catch you when you left Dr Patrick. Your husband's come to see you and he hasn't got long, he says. Sister's let him wait in the television room."

He had never visited her during the afternoon before, and it was only three days since they'd seen each other. Her thoughts flew to Debbie and her cold. There must be some special reason for him breaking into his working day. Had he come with bad news?

She arrived, concerned and agitated, in the common-

room. His face looked serious. After kissing her, he said:

"I had to come, darling, with some rotten news—I can't tell you how upset I am. I've got to make a trip that's going to take a few weeks."

"Oh—"

It was relief that made her draw in a long breath. Relief—that there was nothing wrong with the children, of course—

"It's such a damn shame. I feel awful about it—as though I were letting you down, just when you were starting to come home. It'll hold you up. I'm desperately sorry—But it's for four weeks only, darling, not a day longer, I promise. And when I get back the first thing we're going to concentrate on is to find a new place for us to start all over again—where you'll be happier—"

She was silent.

"Oh God, Anne—please don't hold this against me, darling. I'd give anything not to have to go away just now. Anne—I've been thinking about us such a lot lately. There are so many things I understand about you and me—which I didn't realize before. I took so much for granted— Now, somehow, I feel this is a vital time for us both. Don't mind too much."

"It's—all right."

He was holding her against him, pressing her face against his chest. He was terribly earnest, imploring her to understand.

"I'm just beginning to feel you're coming back to me. I must keep this new contact, sweetheart, and not lose it again. I need you so much. Four weeks will go by quickly, won't they? I'll be counting every minute. Please, please, darling—be waiting for me—"

He had rushed over before setting off for the airport to catch his 'plane.

"It's only a couple of hours' flight—not really far, you

see. You can always feel I'm not so far away—that I could get back in no time at all. And I'm going to write every day—”

She went with him to the car and they drove together along to the gate. He had very little time to spare. He didn't want to let her go.

“I can't bear to leave you this time—”

Then the door shut him in, but he held on to her hand through the window while the car was moving slowly. He went on waving until he turned a corner, and she stood waving after him. He it was who was going to join with the world of people and colour and movement outside—yet he looked so alone.

When he had quite disappeared she turned and stepped back through the gate into this other world. . . .

On Friday evening there was supper with Simon at his flat. No one could help liking Simon at first sight. He was so placid, so predictable, so chubby and affable, with a perfect set of very white teeth which were always flashing a big, welcoming smile. Whereas Michael's skin was no darker than that of a white man with a strong suntan, his was much blacker. He was a research chemist, he'd already been working in England more than a year, and enjoyed his work. He was delighted when Anne praised his cooking, and pressed them to stay until the last possible moment

When a certain stage in one's recovery had been reached, it was possible to find restrictions on one's actual presence in the hospital very much relaxed. After occupational therapy finished at three-thirty in the afternoon, those patients who were passed as having reached that stage were virtually free until they had to report for the night at 9 p.m. The five-thirty issue of drugs could be collected with your mid-day ones and taken with you, so it was possible to go shopping or to a cinema, or to visit near-by friends with plenty of time to spare. You were encouraged to go

out in this way as much as possible, and you were entitled to ask for a late pass sometimes. If you hadn't got yourself into any kind of trouble, and your report was clean, it was always granted and meant another two hours added to your evening.

So, twice a week, it became a regular thing to go to supper with Simon, to leave at exactly twenty minutes to eleven, and dash back just in time to surrender their passes. The three became very good friends. Anne made out his grocery orders, she shopped for him, he gave her the run of the kitchen, and she found herself cooking meals for the first time for many months. They had a lot of laughs, and the evenings became the high spots of the week.

At the same time Anne was keeping a close association with Martha. She would arrive every mid-week visitors' day, and they took her out with them. It was obvious that Martha, although she put up a brave front, was a very lonely woman and the afternoons came to mean a great deal to her.

All their days now were filled with a sense of purpose, for Michael was trying hard to find work. He wrote off a great many applications for posts advertised for school teachers. To some he got no response at all, a number of replies regretted that his lack of qualification made him totally unsuitable, a few invited him for an interview.

To these he would set out, usually for a whole day, buoyed up with tremendous enthusiasm and enjoying the chance they gave of showing him much more of the country. Anne would see him off on an early train, and would be waiting at the station when he was due back in the evening.

Each time she would watch anxiously as he stepped down from a compartment, but although he would wave a greeting as he came along the platform, it was only too easy to see from the set of his shoulders and the dejection in his walk that he had had no success.

"They are always extremely cordial, these headmasters," he said, after a number of fruitless appointments, "very affable and very interested. The interview goes along well, until they ask what I am doing now—and that's when I know it's all over. I have to tell them I'm here, living at the hospital. They inquire what type of hospital it is, and what my trouble has been. After that it's a matter of minutes before they regret implicitly that my having no teaching diploma forces them to turn down my application. I guess it was stupid to ever hope for anything else."

"Do you have to let them know you're here? Why not give another address—Simon's for instance? He wouldn't mind. You're quite better now. It isn't as though you have to be here—the moment you get a job you will leave—"

"It's no good, Anne. They'd still want to know what work I'm doing now, and I'd have to tell them I haven't done anything for a year. Maybe the thing to do is to get some sort of job for a period—then I'd have some standing, and perhaps they'd be more ready to accept the idea that I really am fit again—and in my right mind."

His disappointment and frustration deepened as each time he met with failure, but he still kept trying.

The summer was wearing on, and it was now July. Whenever possible they caught a train to the Downs, and climbed to their favourite spot overlooking the gallops, where they would spend the rest of the day.

They read a great deal, and they talked a lot. They quarrelled constantly, they made-up gloriously. They were very much in love.

"Why is it," she said, one afternoon after they'd been arguing fiercely about nothing very much, "that I go on having anything to do with the most stubborn, pigheaded, mulish man I have ever met?"

He lifted his head from where he was kissing her bare shoulder.

"We're both ruddy marvels when it comes to evading

issues. The first sign of something we can't resolve and we get round it with a fight. Come away with me—just for one night, Anne."

She sat up. They'd had all this out before, many times. Nothing would have been more simple than to find reasons for both of them to be away from the hospital on any given night.

"It won't do—you know that. Not a night or a week-end."

He rolled away from her and lay on his back.

"Then you tell me what's to happen with us. We're not going on like this, are we? We scrap enough as it is."

"It wouldn't stop at one night or one week-end, and pretty soon we'd be finding excuses and making up little deceits to get away together more. That's not for us. It's got to be complete when it comes, Michael, and for always. You have to get started and back on your feet again. You've got to do that very soon, and then I'm coming with you."

He raised himself, reached over and took her hand.

"You would have to be absolutely certain, Anne," he said.

"I am certain now."

"I'd need to be really sure you had thought of everything it would mean, and even then— Oh, darling—what can I say? There's nothing I have to offer you now, except my love. You've got that, but until we know what kind of a life I could give you, I couldn't let you cut loose—"

"But what else can you expect me to do? I could never let Paul go on thinking I am going home. He'll be back himself soon—and then what do I do? That's why you and I have simply got to get this settled quickly. I couldn't possibly go to him for week-ends even, and he'll be expecting me to."

"All right, darling. I have got something worked out. I'm going to stop trying for a school—it was a slim chance

anyway—and I'll go all out for something worthwhile in another line. After all, I was a very good accountant once. I can be one again."

From then on they studied the Situations Vacant columns every morning. The writing off after anything suitable, and the personal interviews, went on.

Then, after four weeks had gone by, Paul wrote to say he was coming home the following Saturday and was going to collect her on his way, and take her with him. It would give them only a night and a day together at home, but he didn't want to wait right round until the next week-end.

"I'm going to tell him, Michael."

"Anne, sweetheart, you musn't—you must not. God, darling, isn't everything bad enough? I've got to make you understand that I've no way of telling whether I'm ever going to be any good to you. I'm trying all the time—but the longer it goes on the more I can see how difficult it's going to be. Employers hesitate to take a chance on me with a responsible job, when I have to tell them I'm just out of hospital, and which hospital.

"Anne, I love you desperately— This is torture! Do I have to give you up and let you go? But what would we do—with no work and no income? I can't take you without having some idea about how you're going to come out of it."

"Paul isn't someone it's easy to deceive, Michael, even if I wanted to."

"God forbid that I should ever expect you to. Anne—it overwhelms me— You're ready to give up everything you have for me—who has no home and no job, and who is a coloured man. You understand? I say the last because although it means nothing to you and me, it's going to mean a whole lot when it comes to you and me and the rest of the world. Do you really know what you would be doing, I wonder?

"I've got to tell you that you must go home this time.

I've got to say you must consider very, very earnestly what it is you're proposing to do. And I want you to promise to talk to me again before you do anything you can't go back on."

"All right—I'll promise that. All you need is for someone to give you a chance, Michael darling—a start. And someone must, before very long."

She saw little of him during the rest of that week; he was out all the time. Saturday morning came, and he went off again, right after breakfast. Just before lunch, Paul arrived.

In spite of the four weeks' break since she had made her previous visit, going home this time wasn't nearly such a strain in itself as it had been before. She'd had four more weeks in which her returning confidence had strengthened. The weather also was very much better, and the old house looked at its most attractive.

She said so as they went up the drive.

"Yes—it does. But I'm sold on the idea of unloading the property and moving anywhere you want to. How would you like to live right in Town? Or we might go into the question of building. Anyhow, we can talk it all over tonight and tomorrow. Here I am—back home, with no prospect that I can see of having to go off again for months, and I'm going to get busy. It really is exciting, darling—like starting together all over again."

The children had been spending some weeks with their grandmother and they were not due back until the next week, because Miss Bream was also taking her holiday. That evening he got out his drawing-pad and pencil and began making sketches of houses and layouts of rooms. Paul, having once converted himself to the idea that some project would be a good thing, was always ready to tackle it wholeheartedly.

She sat watching him quietly, unable to speak. There was a heavy feeling in the region of her heart, a constriction in her throat which made speaking at all difficult.

It was wrong to let him go on. She should say at once: 'You've got to stop this—all this planning for our future, because I'm not going to be in it with you. I'm going to leave you. You won't want me, anyhow, because I love someone else and nothing can ever be the same as it was for you and me. I need him—I'm longing to be with him, not here with you. What do you say—when I tell you I'm only here now because he made me come?'

He stopped talking, with his pencil poised, and looked at her. He'd been asking questions and she hadn't heard him.

Seeing her face, he said, "Darling, you do look all in. I'm so sorry. I'm wearing you out with this."

"No you're not. I—find it difficult to follow— You know I never could understand about elevations and groundplans. I have to have things standing up the right way—before I can tell what they're going to look like."

He laughed.

"You'll see—you'll be every bit as enthusiastic as I am once we really get started. I'm going to contact some agents on Monday."

"The boys aren't going to like giving up their beloved woods."

"The boys will have to settle for what we give them. You're the one that matters." He dropped the sketch-block on the floor and drew her head down against his shoulder. "Everything is going to be just the way you want it."

She pulled away, stood up, and said, "I'll go to bed now. It's getting quite late."

She was sitting at the dressing-table, looking at a folding leather frame, with snapshots of the children tucked all over it, when he came through the door from the bathroom. He stood behind her, watching her in the mirror.

She put the pictures down. He turned her round by the shoulders to face him. Kneeling down, he undid the ribbon

on her dressing gown, and put his hands on her body, caressing her.

"What is so wonderful to me," he said, "is to have the part of you that is my wife back at last. For so long I've had to be careful with you—always consider first how I was going to approach you. You were so often on edge and easily upset—I must be careful how I handled you. Sometimes it was like having to handle a child—"

She drew in her breath and frowned, and he said quickly:

"I'm only saying it like this to emphasize how wonderful it is to have the old you back. You're tired tonight, but apart from that you're composed, more poised, far more—radiant, like you used to be. I saw it immediately when I called for you today, and—oh, darling—it did something to me. You haven't looked like that for many, many months. I want to say something just once, sweetheart, and then I'm never going to mention it again.

"I don't suppose I'll ever be able to quite fully understand what you suffered, but I've come to appreciate very clearly lately a little of the mental hell you must have gone through. I was an unheeding, insensitive ox before, and now I know just what I did to you."

"You? But—you didn't—"

"I didn't do anything. That's the trouble—I didn't notice. I accepted everything as all right. I had to get on, to be a success—for my wife and family as much as for myself, yes—but it must have often seemed to you that I put my job before everything else. I think I did, Anne. You were alone so much, left with the kids to bring up, as though after I'd supplied the cash to feed and clothe and educate them, my responsibility was over—"

"Paul—you couldn't help it, and it wasn't only that. There were an awful lot of other things—nothing to do with you—"

"I know. Your life, they tell me, when you were small. Your parents—no love, or security. But it doesn't alter the

fact that when you married me I should have set myself to see that you forgot all that; never had to feel insecure again; seen to it that you realized it was finished and couldn't matter any more—"

"You mustn't—ever—blame yourself. You mustn't, Paul. You can't help the way I'm made—"

"The way you're made is wonderful. Perfect for me. I only wanted you to be clear that I do understand and from now on there's going to be nothing more important than our life together. I think it's true—what they say—about it taking unhappiness, sometimes, to draw people closer to each other."

It was when he had said that that she began to cry.

Once started she couldn't make herself stop. In bed she went on sobbing uncontrollably. Concerned, he tried to put his arms round her to comfort her, but she remained face downwards, remote, crying into the pillow.

"What is it, darling? Was it what I said? "

She shook her head, and managed to get out, "It's the first time I've been able to cry. The first time since before I was ill—I couldn't all this while— I've wanted to so often—"

"Oh," he said, uncertainly, then tried to tease her out of it. "Then can I take it as another sign you're cured—you're able to cry now, when before you couldn't? Do you think you could stop—you've caught up with the arrears—"

She stifled the sobbing at last, but remained with her face in the pillow. He caressed the length of her back and thigh.

"Anne—let me see your face. Turn round to me."

She turned her head to look at him.

"I want to love you—"

"No."

She had never hated herself so much as at that moment, after the word had come out so sharply. His hand, smoothing her, stiffened and stayed still.

"I'm sorry. Paul—I'm so sorry—"

"But—you're well again. Almost, anyway. How long do you expect me to go on waiting?"

He looked puzzled now, and terribly hurt.

This was a moment, again, for letting him know that their love together was finished. For shattering him, for making him understand he had to leave her out of his future, for having him get out of her bed. He was wanting her answer.

"Paul—"

He looked steadily back at her, seeking reassurance.

"I am—sorry for crying like that. It is true what I said—there were so many times when to be able to cry might have helped. Just now something snapped and let me do it, when before it had kept wound up tight in my chest. Paul—I don't want to come back to this house."

"That's exactly what I keep on saying you mustn't do. We won't even make it week-ends. We can go somewhere else—stay at a hotel—"

"No—I don't mean that either. You see—it doesn't worry me now—not the actual having to journey somewhere, or be with people, like it used to. So I don't have to do it for that reason."

"Can't you think of any other reason for spending your week-ends with me—here or somewhere else?"

"I find—well, I find breaking up the time—being partly in hospital and partly outside it—disturbing."

"I really can't see why."

"I'm wanting to get right away from the hospital now—right away. Not half and half, as it would be. And until I can—get right away—I don't want to break up the time."

"How much longer is it going to be, do you think?"

"Dr Patrick says another month, and then he expects to discharge me."

"I see." He was thoughtful. "All right, Anne. I suppose that makes sense. Meanwhile, I'll find us a new place to

live. It might not be as soon as that though. Would you mind coming here, after the month, if it was just to organize the move?"

She despised herself again, utterly, because she was letting him go on believing. She shook her head.

He sighed deeply as he withdrew his arm completely from over her, the hurt still in his face, and turned onto his back. He lay looking unseeingly up at the ceiling. She wanted to make it easier for him, but there was nothing she could bring herself to do.

The next evening, before leaving to return to the hospital, she packed the folding frame with the pictures of the children into her bag.

All the way back he hardly spoke. He got out, as usual, in the drive by the entrance to her block. to come round and help her with her case.

She walked quickly along the gravel path. Before going through the door she turned towards him, where he was still standing, watching her go. The way he was looking made her long to be able to go back and comfort him somehow—tell him not to look like that, not to mind so much. But it would be a pitying kind of comfort, because she was hopelessly in love with someone else, and had nothing left for him. And if he knew that, it would be more terrible than ever.

They had stopped her sleeping drug, trying to get her out of the habit of relying on one. Hour after hour that night she lay on the narrow, uncomfortable mattress, her mind in turmoil, sleep a long, long way off. At two o'clock she went out to ask the night nurse if she could have something, but apparently it was beyond the power of the nurse to issue anything that hadn't been written up by one's doctor, and all she could have was a drink of hot milk. It didn't do any good, she was still awake when the dawn broke, and was thankful when at six o'clock she was entitled to get up and go into the kitchen to make ready the big, brown enamel teapots, and carry them round to the others. Most of them were reluctant to wake, and had to be roused with a call and a touch.

She found a note for her in the box where the mail was put after delivery. It was from Michael, to say he wouldn't be in the chapel that morning because he'd heard about a job during the week-end and was going after it first thing. He would meet her at eleven o'clock on the railway bridge on the common.

The morning dragged on. She felt alternately hopeful and depressed. She did her share of tidying and polishing and flower-arranging in the ward, then joined other patients for coffee in the 'White Cockatoo', but left her cup half-filled and walked to the edge of the common.

It was still much too early, but there was a chance he

might get back sooner than he'd expected, and anyway she could be waiting when he came. She willed as hard as she could that this time he might be lucky and get whatever the position was he had gone after. It meant so much to them. Anything to just give him a start, to get him back into the routine, to shake off the hospital, to be able to offer his services on an equal footing with other applicants when the chance of something more rewarding came along. His heart was in teaching, so anything else could only be second-best. But it was the re-establishing of his self-esteem which was so important. The break with hospitalization, the struggle to reorientate oneself with life 'outside' after such a long time, was a hurdle no one ever found it easy to clear. A coloured man, starting out in a country still new to him, was going to need all the support she could give him.

At the bridge there was no sign of anyone, but it was still only a little after ten o'clock. She walked up and down the path by the wire fence, seeing the shiny, curving railway lines down below, feeling the heat from the sun as the temperature rose. It was going to be a hot day.

The minutes went crawling by. There wasn't a soul to be seen anywhere across the whole expanse of common land; not a movement, except from a flow of vehicles running like toy models along the road at the distant end, too far off even to be heard. It seemed as though all life was suspended, hanging in mid-air, waiting with her.

She felt a prickly sensation deep down under her scalp, realized she was pulling and pulling at her lower lip.

She sat down on the grass and found some cigarettes in a packet in her pocket, and one match in the box. She struck it, but before she could get the cigarette alight it went out. Her hands were shaking. She must have—she had to have—this cigarette. She felt sweat in her palms and the prickling ran down her neck and along her spine, and a sustained drumming took its place in her head.

There must be someone I can ask for a light. But there is no one. God, how quiet and deserted it all is outside—except for this noise in my head and now, through the drumming, the sound of a train approaching here, where I am, on the bridge.

She got up and went to the part of the wall where she could see over it.

It's coming right straight at me, I know that, but I'm not going to allow myself to get frightened—there's no need, there's no need! Nothing can happen. I'm nearly twenty-eight, grown-up, a mother with three children—nothing can happen to them or to me. The train is coming straight at me—straight at this spot where I'm standing, I can see the wheels, and I shan't be able to move—but when it does get here it can't drag me under—it will have to just go on beneath the wall and I shan't have to see it after that."

Then it had passed, less and less of it racing under her feet and away on the other side, ignoring her.

She pressed her fists to her temples and leaned her face against the rough wall.

The train's gone this time, but if all that terror is going to come back—what difference that it has gone this time—I couldn't face it all over again; and I know I can't stop it when it comes—

She put her arms against the wall and her face down on them, afraid to see, afraid to stay, afraid to go back. She wasn't aware of Michael's arrival. He was taking his time because he was early and didn't expect her to be there, and he couldn't see her until he had actually rounded the end of the wall.

Then he took hold of her and turned her towards him. She seemed almost too distraught to know who he was.

"Hey," he said, "what is it?"

He gave her a little shake.

"This is Mike. What's happened to you?"

He couldn't tell whether or not she was glad to see him.

There was that awful frenzy in her eyes, like there'd been the first time he had spoken to her.

"Did you get it?"

"What?"

She was shouting at him.

"Did they let you have it? The job—did they?"

"Oh! No, Anne, I didn't get it. Not that one."

She stared back at him.

"Don't look like that. There'll be something else— Any day — Don't look like that—"

He was holding her wrists in front of him, as she pressed herself against the wall.

She wrenched her hands away, gave him a push which unbalanced him, and started to run from the bridge and headlong across the common. He went after her and caught her up, and she fought him wildly to get out of his grasp. It was all he could do to hold on to her until her panic spent itself a little, and he was able to force her down on to the grass, where he held her by the shoulders, pressing his mouth hard down on hers until she stopped struggling, and lay still.

He waited, smoothing the hair away from her eyes, until the fear had quite gone out of them.

"Better now?"

"Michael," she said. "I can't go on like this."

"Listen to me. I didn't get the job—but I've something else to tell you. I was with Simon yesterday—helping him to pack. He's having a holiday and he's gone off for two weeks. He asked me to keep an eye on the flat. He knows about you and me—he's given us the key—"

She asked the Staff Nurse for a late pass which would allow her to be out until eleven that night. They had got used to Michael coming and going at all hours, so for him it was easy.

She sat up carefully, so as not to disturb him, for he was sleeping, one arm behind his head, the white pillow making his skin even more brown. There was still light coming in at the window, where the curtains were open. Her watch confirmed that it was only ten o'clock, and they had almost an hour before it would be necessary to go.

It was his birthday. They had been pleased that it had fallen in the second week of Simon's holiday, and they'd celebrated with a special supper and a bottle of wine. Now he looked completely at peace, very vulnerable, and as though he was set to go on sleeping all night.

She looked round her, at the comfort and intimacy of the small room, which had grown so familiar. It was very feminine—Simon rented it from a woman who had furnished it for herself—and his personal things, like the photographs of his family in plain leather frames, his text books, the ties he'd left festooning the mirror on the kidney dressing-table, his shabby cricket bag in a corner against the roses on the wallpaper, looked incongruous, but comfortable and content to be there.

From the table the other side of Mike she could smell the roses—the real ones—she had brought in herself.

They didn't want to have to rush the last hour, so he'd have to be woken. She pressed the light switch beside her, got out of bed to go to the kitchen for coffee. Within

seconds she was back in, completely under the clothes and up against him. He was awake instantly.

"For Pete's sake! Where are you getting to?"

"Moths! Enormous ones—swarming in at the window."

He laughed, reached over to put her light out again, got up to deal with the moths and close the curtains.

"Two—at least. You can come out now."

He put on some clothes and went for the coffee. When he came back and sat on the bed beside her, she was almost asleep herself.

"Wake up. Dream's over, darling. And there's a hell of a lot of washing-up in the sink."

"I'll do all that tomorrow." She pulled him down, kissing him. "Just for tonight—the dream's over."

"Yes," he said. "Just for tonight. We still have three more days."

"That's only having the flat. Soon we'll have every day. A lifetime."

He took her face in his hands, kissed her lingeringly, then said solemnly, "Do you feel like talking seriously?"

"No. Only if you must."

"We've got three more days. If I leave what I have to say until the last, we'll have no time to get used to it. If I say it now, I'm afraid it may spoil the three days."

"And if I let you go on talking, perhaps I'll come to understand what it is you're talking about."

He got up from the bed, away from her.

"Anne—this is what I'm trying to say. I'm going to discharge myself from the hospital at the end of this week."

She sat up, instantly alert.

"Oh Michael—what does that mean? That you've got work at last? Oh, darling—I knew if we were only patient—"

"I've got a job. I start next week, and I've found a room

I can rent. But, Anne—I'm going alone. I'm not going to see you again, after I've left."

She stared incredulously back at him.

"What are you saying—you're not going to see me—?"

He didn't look at her.

"You see—I've come to realize more and more strongly every day during these last weeks—while I've been trying to set myself up somewhere—just what I'm up against. I can't tell how much my lack of success is due to the fact that I have to say I've just got over a mental illness, and they can't know it was a temporary disorder—and how much is because I'm a coloured man. You understand? That is the last thing they would ever admit—prejudice—of course, but so far as work where any kind of responsibility is involved, they don't want to take a risk on me. Portering, manual labour, digging holes in roads—there's any amount of that, but anything requiring a degree of intelligence is not available for me.

"I come up against a brick wall each time, and I can see no way round it. I have my two children to provide for. I'm thirty-three today. I find myself with no income, no work, and no prospect of anything I can reasonably expect could grow into some kind of a career. What can I do, Anne? How could I possibly take you with me? I can't start on equal terms—"

He came to her, earnestly, "Darling—it would be so easy, so terribly easy, for me to work up that irrational hatred again—this time against these people who won't give me a chance—either because I'm coloured or because I've had an illness; I still can't be completely certain which it is. It's an insidious thing, that hatred, Anne—it takes hold of you and it burns right into your soul. It degrades you, it destroys all self-respect—you find yourself slinking away from showing your face where it might meet derision and humiliation because it isn't white. If that were to build up

inside me again, as it once did—for any reason—I shall defeat myself, I know. I've got to keep my confidence in my own capacity for intelligent work, and a decent way of living."

"But—that's just where I could help you. It's not because you're coloured that they won't take you. You've got to believe that—I'll help you to keep on believing it. You've got so much to give—"

"You say that. I know if I had you to keep making me remember to feel it too—"

She hung on to hope. "But you have got work now. You just said so. What is it?"

"Oh," he was up again, impatiently moving about the room, "it's well enough. A small firm—just starting up. I'm going to keep their books and make myself generally useful in the office "

"Well—you see? That's wonderful! "

"The money is so poor, Anne, and there're no prospects of any kind."

"It's a start."

"I can't see it leading anywhere. It has the virtue of getting me out of the hospital and working at a job—that's about all. I'll just about be able to pay my rent and buy my food."

"Why do you say you won't see me again? "

"Because I know now that it's what must happen in the end, and to prolong it will make it harder. Anne—sweet-heart," he came back to her, "don't look so stricken. How am I going to make you understand? I love you intensely—I'm always going to love you. I won't let myself think too much yet how I'm going on without you. God knows I don't amount to much these days, darling—but I'm not going to add the injustice of taking you away—"

"Injustice? Don't you allow me to have any say? You're not settling my life for me. I'll be doing that. I'm not a child—"

He looked long and searchingly at her. "You're not a child. On the contrary—you've got three of your own, and that's another great, big, important factor. You can't pretend, even to yourself, that you would ever let them go. You know you couldn't cut yourself right off from them."

"They're used to being without me now, Michael. I sometimes think it would be much better for them if they didn't have me again— They worry about me— They see me as something odd, not like the other children's mothers. That's the terrible thing—"

"They're not always going to. All that will come right."

She pulled him down again, fighting still, but knowing how hopeless it was.

"Michael—our meeting like that—just at that one time in our lives—it wasn't an accident. Can't you see that? If we hadn't found each other—who knows how we would be now? There was a need then, and there still is. There's always going to be a need. I don't want us ever, ever to lose each other—"

"But that's how it has to be eventually, sweetheart. I know it. Darling—let's make the very most of the three days we have left.

"Drink your coffee, if it isn't too cold, and get dressed—or we'll overstay our time, and that will mean no more late passes for you."

"Just be very careful not to wake the others, Mrs Lester."

The clock on the desk showed one minute to eleven when she reported to the night nurse in her office in the big ward. It was the gentle, understanding little nurse, to whom no one ever wanted to give trouble.

She undressed in the washroom, carried her clothes into the small ward, laid them on her chair, climbed into bed.

"Are you all right, Anne? "

An unexpected voice spoke loudly from a bed right down at the other end.

"What? Oh—yes, Marion," she recognized the voice. "The nurse will be coming in to make sure I'm in bed. Goodnight."

Her body settled into the sagging depression down the middle of the mattress, which did at least overcome the likelihood of one's rolling off the sides. She lay still, bringing up her toes from where the nurses had folded the flap of the bed clothes right back at the bottom.

From Marion's bed the red tip of a lighted cigarette glowed and dimmed. Smoking in bed was against all rules. The red spot disappeared under the covers as the nurse put her head round the door, then emerged again, rose to head height and moved along in the shadowy room which was lit only by the orange night-light. It hovered round Joan's bed. There came the sound of an amplified sob as Marion leaned over the sleeping girl.

Anne turned her back on it, and the rest of the room, and pulled the sheet up to her eyes.

Marion could be a nuisance at any time. She was a big girl with short, cropped hair and a strident voice. She had been a nurse herself, but had jeopardized her career completely by helping herself from the narcotics cupboard, one day when she had been in charge of it, and attempting suicide. She knew, so she said, that everyone—her parents especially, and all her associates—were persecuting her, and she could get aggressive very quickly. She had formed a violent attachment for Joan, embarrassing her by constantly lavishing presents on her, and sulking when Joan refused them and begged Marion to leave her alone.

"Joan," she said, dramatically, over the bed, "you must wake up and talk to me. If someone doesn't talk to me I'm going to throw myself out of the window. I swear I mean it this time."

Joan moaned in her sleep, but wouldn't wake up.

Anne heard the slap of Marion's slippers coming along the ward in her direction. Then the sobbing was resumed over herself.

"Anne—you are awake. Talk to me. I can't rest tonight, Anne. I'm grieving too much. I'm grieving for my mother. She died today."

She held up the sobs while she paused hopefully, peering down into Anne's face.

"I had a telegram this evening to say so. How am I going to live on without my mother?"

Anne pulled up the sheet a little higher round her ears. There was a creaking from the next bed but one. It was Phyllis, who was a light sleeper. She sat up, sizing up the situation at once.

"Leave Anne alone, Marion," she called, softly, "and get back to bed. The first time your mother died was three weeks ago, and she keeps on doing it."

Marion took no notice of her. She tugged to draw back the bedclothes, pushing her arms round Anne's neck and clinging to her. But the sobs were too false, the heaving shoulders theatrical, the cigarette was singeing Anne's hair.

"And Joan," she went on, "the one person in the world I care enough about to stay alive at all—now my mother's gone—won't speak to me. She hates me, Anne. I don't know what I've done. I've got some tablets under my pillow. When I get back to bed I'm going to swallow them all—or else jump out of the window, and it'll be Joan's fault."

Phyllis got out of bed and came along, whispering fiercely. "Stop it. You hated your mother, you've always said so—The tablets are for your bowels and we're sick of hearing about jumping out of the window. If you get up on the sill again you'll have to get down by yourself."

Anne tried to force the hands apart, but they locked and clung on.

"Don't you be mean to me, Anne. Don't you be mean to me, like everyone else is. Never mind what they say—talk to me, Anne. I like you and I haven't got a soul who cares what happens to me. You've got Mike. You were out with him again tonight, weren't you? I've got no one—My mother's dead and Joan won't speak to me—I've got no one—"

Anne struggled against the encircling arms. Her inability to loosen Marion's grip, the mouthings into her ear, the reference to Michael, broke down her control.

"Shut up!" She made no attempt to keep her voice down. "Shut up—do you hear me? Shut up and get your hands off me—"

Heaving herself right off the bed she broke the grip and pushed the girl away with all her strength. Marion's feet slipped on the polished surface, she fell heavily to the floor, banging her head on the iron rail of the next bed. She burst into furious tears, lying back and shouting up at Anne:

"I'll make you sorry you did that. Who do you think you are—? I know what you've been doing tonight—I've seen you out with him and that black man, lots of times I'll tell them where you've been—"

Anne followed her up and gave her a stinging slap across the mouth, as calls came from other beds and the nurse pushed open the door.

"What in Heaven's name is going on in here? Miss Claydon," she said to Phyllis, "get back to bed this instant. Marion—stop that yelling and put that cigarette out before you set fire to the hospital. I'm going to report you for smoking after lights out. The rest of you lie down at once and get back to sleep. Mrs Lester, pull yourself together and tell me what happened."

Anne lay on her bed. She was finding, for the second time inside two weeks, that at last having started to cry she wasn't able to stop. She stuffed the pillow into her

mouth, cursing herself, knowing that this was a calamity and there was bound to be an investigation—the first time she had been the centre of trouble. The kindly nurse brought her a hot drink, but she went on crying until the Night Superintendent came on his rounds and authorized a sedative for her.

The summons came immediately after breakfast the next day.

"Sister George tells me you've suddenly taken to waking the whole ward in the middle of the night and scrapping with one of your room-mates."

Dr Patrick smiled quite affably, motioning her to get on the couch.

"I'm sorry I caused a disturbance. I don't really know what made me behave like that—but honestly it was nothing more than a fit of depression."

"Uh—um! What caused the depression? Something that happened during the evening? Was it anything someone did—or said? The girl, Marion, for instance—or anyone else?"

"Marion often says silly things. I don't usually take any notice."

"You were out late last night, weren't you?"

"Yes—but that had nothing to do with the fuss. I mean—it didn't do me any harm. It wasn't because I was over-tired, or anything like that."

"No, I don't think it was," he said. "Did you know your husband came to see you yesterday afternoon?"

She lifted her head in real surprise, to look at him.

"No. I had no idea—he didn't say he was coming—I didn't know—"

"Sister George happened to mention to me that he was

here waiting for you, but you were out. I had a talk with him. He said he would come back in the early evening. You didn't see him because you were still out."

"But—what did he want? What did he say?"

"He just wanted to see you. Is that so surprising or unusual? I told him how pleased I was with your rate of progress."

She was silent.

"Mrs Lester—I'm not going to regard your outburst last night as having any significance so far as progress from your illness is concerned. I told your husband yesterday that I thought you would be ready to go home quite soon. I'm going to recommend now that you go right away."

"You mean—you're sacking me? For last night?"

"I don't mean that. You haven't broken any hospital rules, so far as I know. I mean that I think no good can come of your staying here any longer, and it would be best for you to leave. I can't help you very much more."

He swivelled himself gently from side to side in his chair as he watched her.

"I think, Mrs Lester, that you've got yourself into some kind of situation—I don't know how deep it goes—when it might be a good thing if I precipitate matters by sending you home. You haven't wanted to talk to me about it, so I can't offer you any direct advice."

There was silence except for a little regular squeak, with his moves, from the chair. He took a box of cigarettes from his desk and offered her one.

She said, at last, "He's discharging himself from here at the end of the week."

The squeak stopped, then went on again.

"Oh? I didn't know that. But it doesn't really affect the issue, does it?"

"I want to go with him. I'm ready to."

He flicked his lighter and leaned over towards her.

"Are you aware of what you would be doing?"

"Of course I am. That's what he keeps saying—don't you begin, please."

"But you see—I look at the whole matter from an impartial viewpoint. I see a woman who has a very great deal on the one side—husband, children, home, an established standard of living. She says she's ready to give all that up for a man she's known a matter of months—months during which she was emotionally ill—in an environment unnatural to her, for a man who's just recovered from the same kind of illness, and who is coloured. On the face of it, it would seem that if I have any regard at all for my patient's welfare, I should urge her to think very carefully about what she is proposing to do."

"Dr Patrick—it's all been decided already. I have thought about it carefully—I want to go with Michael, and it's he who won't have me. There's no more I can do about that. The thing now is that I can't go back to Paul and pretend things are all right—just like they used to be."

"Why not?"

"Why not! Why—because it's something I couldn't do. What do you take me for—?"

"I think you would be justified in giving it a try."

"You mean I should deliberately attempt to cover up the whole thing—all that's happened? Of course I can't."

"When you came here six months ago you were a very sick woman, and you were convinced yourself that you were going insane. I knew you weren't likely to do that, but you were in a very bad state of stress. This—friendship, this attachment, was formed during that time and when you were recovering. It is perfectly possible, you know, that your judgment could be considerably impaired at that time."

"Don't," she said. "You don't understand. You—belittle it."

"To me," he said, "it is possible—in fact it's very likely."

The man isn't my patient, so you're justified in saying I don't know the first thing about him. He may be all you think he is, and worth breaking up your marriage for. You may still think so in another six months. All I'm suggesting is that you give yourself that time to make sure.

"That's not so unreasonable, and you wouldn't be doing your husband any greater wrong than you've done him already. After all—should you deprive the children of their mother until both you *and* he decide it's the only thing to do? I suggest that you go home now, don't expect too much of yourself to begin with, and see how you get on. I don't think you should rush to tell your husband everything that has happened—you can't expect him to see your behaviour in quite the way I do."

"I'm going home, Michael—tomorrow, or the day after."

"Would you come with me tonight, Anne? For the last time?"

"No."

"No—of course not."

"Michael—will you write to me sometimes? I must know what's happening to you."

"I don't know. Perhaps—just once. I'll write just once if things are going well."

"Please, promise to write—"

They spent their last afternoon together, sitting in the cricket pavilion, where they had sat the rainy afternoon after the scene in the pottery shed with Bernie, and where Martin had died. The groundsman had his big, mechanical mower out. There was the smell of the cut grass. The top of the tall chimney stack was smoking lazily. . .

On the telephone Miss Bream said that Paul hadn't got back yet that evening. He hadn't told her he wouldn't be in for his dinner. He hadn't gone home for it last night, either. It made things very awkward for a person when she

couldn't be told whether or not she was to keep a meal hot. She would see that he had the message that Anne was coming home for good, and would be waiting to hear which day he could collect her. . . .

After his second unsuccessful call that day to see Anne, Paul eventually left Highfield round about seven o'clock.

She had been out since early afternoon, and the Sister had said then that she wasn't likely to be back until eleven, because she had a pass which allowed her to be out until that time. Did he know of any friends in the neighbourhood where she might be and where he could go and perhaps find her?

If he did know where she was, he thought bitterly, she'd hardly be likely to thank him for finding and joining her. Even so, he killed some hours and went back the second time just to make sure she still hadn't come in.

He went straight from Berkshire to Kensington.

When Jan opened the door to him she was in the middle of making-up for a date that evening, and hadn't yet put on her dress. She'd pulled on a housecoat to go and answer the bell.

"Well," she said, "you're a great surprise."

She looked at him closely, then put out her hand to draw him inside.

"Ten minutes later and I shouldn't have been here."

"Don't hold up anything because of me," he said. "I can go."

"You won't. The drink's on the table. Get one for yourself and for me, and I'll be with you in a moment."

She went into her bedroom and he heard her telephoning while he fixed the drinks. Then she came and sat beside him, watching him.

"Tell me about it," she said.

"I've just got back from the hospital."

"I gathered as much. What happened?"

"I should have realized before. It's always been a damn sight too easy for them at that place. They've all day long to be together—to go anywhere. It may have been going on for months."

She seemed to understand without having to ask what he meant.

"Has it, do you think?"

"I don't know. How can I tell? I never dreamed of anything like this happening. But I've been completely certain about it since her last time home, two weeks ago. It can have been going on for months. All the time she was getting better—it was quite stunning, the way she suddenly started to get better and went on, steadily getting back to her old self, until she was—glowing, when I picked her up last time. A glow which shocked me in a way—it made me realize how much she means to me, how much I love her, how much I have to have her back. And I was idiot enough to accept that it had all been brought about by rest and treatment and that ineffectual, reticent little doctor I saw this afternoon. I thought that now the glow was back, it was for me. I knew it would take much more than just being better to make her look like she did.

"But, when we were home, by the way she was acting, I suddenly knew it wasn't for me. I knew there was someone else. Someone who wasn't a doctor but who was helping her, and—whoever it was—she was in love with him. That was why she looked the way she did—and why she said she didn't want to spend days away from the hospital. It all suddenly became so clear."

"Finish your drink," she said

"I've tortured myself ever since, Jan. There have been moments when I was on the point of dashing off and making her come back with me there and then. But if you'd seen the cowed and frightened and deranged creature she was at the beginning of the year—you'd understand why I couldn't do that. If I deliberately did anything that might

send her back to being like that again— You wouldn't wish it on your worst enemy, Jan."

She took his now empty glass and poured him another drink.

"The most important thing," he went on, "was that she must be allowed to get really well. This man was making her well, so—ironically—I had to be grateful to him. That's how I saw it all, Jan, and why I've done nothing to stop it and why I rushed off today because I felt I had to know for certain. I'd no idea what I was going to do when I got there. But she wasn't in, anyway—she's been out since after lunch and she won't go back until eleven. And she isn't alone."

He knocked back his drink and took the bottle himself to replenish his glass.

"Sit still," Jan said. "I'm going to get you something to eat."

"I don't want anything. Besides—you're going out."

"No, I'm not," she said. "I'll get something for us both. You don't have to go."

The next day he got through his work somehow, took Jan home, drank a lot more, waited until it was late, then set off for his own home.

When he got in he poured himself another drink and sat in the darkened living-room, only one light switched on near the table beside him, where he could see the clock. It was well after midnight now. They would have had to be in by eleven at the latest. She would have had to be in bed in the ward at least an hour by now. He put his head in his hands.

There was a movement at his elbow, and he found Nikky standing beside his chair.

"I went to be excused and I heard you down here. I've been listening a long time. I listened last night, too. Why didn't you come? I was wondering about you."

He put his arm round the little boy.

"You must never worry about me. I worked very late last night and was too tired to drive back. You see—you mustn't worry. It was selfish of me not to think, though—next time I promise I'll telephone and speak to you if I'm not coming home."

"You're awfully bristly. Are you worrying about something?"

"You mean I'm looking scruffy. Well, I'll have a quick shower and then come and look in on you before I go to bed. You go and snuggle down and get to sleep."

"Did you find Miss Bream's note about Mummy?"

He felt a quick stab of fear.

"What about Mummy? I haven't seen any note."

"You're pinching my arm. It was to say Mummy 'phoned this evening that she wants you to go and fetch her. She can come home to stay."

"Nikky! Are you sure that's what she said? What time did she 'phone?"

"It was twice actually. This evening. The last time was while we were having our supper."

This evening. All the time he'd been driving himself crazy, imagining her in bed somewhere with some man he couldn't put a face to, she'd been trying to reach him.

He gave Nikky a squeeze and a kiss

"Oh—the bristles. Never mind, Nick. Come on up to bed. I'll go and fetch Mummy tomorrow."

"It's one o'clock now. I've never been downstairs at one o'clock in the night before. Oh—and one of Pip's rabbits had babies again today."

She was coming home. He still didn't know what was in her mind. Perhaps he'd been wrong after all. About everything. Perhaps because he'd been lonely and worried he'd allowed his imagination to run riot. Perhaps that was it. That had to be it!

Anne and Miss Bream sat facing each other across the kitchen table, and although they had just had a first-class row, and Miss Bream was wiping her eyes behind the thick spectacles which made them so out of proportion to the rest of her face, they were actually feeling more warm towards each other than at any other moment in their association.

Tension between them had been mounting ever since Anne's return home, and it was obvious that they were heading for a blow-up. The housekeeper was capable and very conscientious, but she'd had no experience of any kind with children, and their manners and tolerance towards each other had lapsed lamentably. There was always bickering going on around them all. Miss Bream's comments about children who were allowed to run wild, or mothers who left it to other people to bring up their offspring and then didn't like it when they were bad and had to be punished, must be challenged before it was possible to pin her down to a direct statement and take it from there. It was extremely difficult to get back into anything like the old routine.

They had found a new home, put their old one up for sale, completed the deal, and expected to move into a pleasant house on Richmond Green well in time for Christmas. Although it was winter now, the boys babbled happily of summer days to come, spent on the river. There

was a little nursery school just round the corner, where they could put Debbie's name down for her to start after her third birthday. The garden would be big enough for Pip to be allowed to keep his beloved rabbits, and they would take one of the pugs with them.

The chaos which was building up all over the house, in connection with packing for the removal, was another thing which made Miss Bream unhappy.

Then, one explosive morning, Anne found her bathing one of the dogs in the sink, which meant that an enormous number of black hairs found their way onto washing-up mops and drying cloths, and couldn't be dislodged. After they had calmed down somewhat, they sat over a cup of tea to have it all out. In tears, poor Miss Bream explained that she knew she wasn't giving satisfaction but, after all, she had been in complete charge of the household for a matter of months, and it wasn't easy when someone who was a stranger to her came back to take everything out of her hands, just like that.

There was a great deal of justice in what she said, and they agreed that Miss Bream was a treasure who would be worth her weight in gold in some place where once more she could take complete responsibility, without being encumbered by the mistress of the house breathing down her neck the whole of the time.

They set to work right away to find the best possible place for her, and became better friends and a whole lot more understanding of each other whilst she was working out her notice. When she did finally go, it was with effusive farewells from all the family, and with one of the pugs, which they gave her as a parting present.

It left Anne very much in need of help in the house; and then she had an idea which she turned over in her mind a long time before discussing it with Paul, and doing anything about it.

During the weeks since she had left the hospital, she had

never let anything interfere with her writing regularly to Martha. Now she set out to visit her, where Martha lived alone in a semi-detached house in a suburb south of the Thames. She was overjoyed when she opened her door to find Anne on the step, and they spent a cosy afternoon together in her immaculate little front parlour.

She listened carefully when Anne told her of the idea. It was that Martha should be invited to live with them for a few months as their housekeeper. If she liked it and settled down with them, and they with her, it could become a permanent arrangement.

She jumped at the chance. The amount of housework Martha had to do never worried her. Physically she was wiry, but always she would be subject to bouts of shattering depression and loneliness, and the more she worked and the more people she was with, the less the depression was able to take hold. Her own two children she had lost when they were both in their teens, one with polio and the other in a street accident. So altogether it promised to be a happy arrangement for both she and Anne, and she was prepared to come in time to help with the moving and settling in at Richmond.

By the time they had discussed and worked out all details and dates, it was time for Anne to leave. But there was still one subject which she knew she had to bring up with Martha. And Martha waited for it, knowing also that it had to be mentioned.

"I can't tell you," Anne said, "how happy I am that you're ready to come. There's still one thing—we have to talk about. So that you'll know everything."

"Yes."

Martha looked directly back at her. "You have to tell me what happened about Michael. When I came on those visiting days I could see how it had developed, Anne—I didn't need to be told then. I worried an awful lot about what was going to happen to you—an awful lot. Then you

went off abruptly and you've never mentioned him once in your letters. Of course I've gone on wondering. Where is he now? How did it finish between you?"

"I don't know where he is—I wish I did. I don't know where he is or what he's doing—and I can't get him out of my mind. Whether he's well—I haven't heard anything. Nothing since the day I saw him before I left, although he promised to write to me at least once. That was if things were going well for him, Martha—and he hasn't written. He was starting what sounded a reasonably good job the next week. I can't stop thinking about him."

"Is that because you still love him?"

"Yes— No— I don't know what it is. I'm happy with Paul now, Martha, very happy. He's changed, he loves me so much and shows it all the time, and now we're back together there's a far greater appreciation of each other than ever there was before. And the children—they've accepted me again, they behave naturally and naughtily with me, and I feel that soon Nikky will forget to look anxious if I happen to say I've got a headache, or that I'm tired and they must be good. It's so sweet how he makes the other two behave—so grown-up, the way he looks after me. He's adorable—they all are."

"But always Michael's at the back of my mind—when I'm alone and quiet I can hear him saying the things he used to say to me. It's as though there's a bit of myself I can't give to anyone but Michael. A bit that's missing—left behind, back at Highfield. I'm throwing myself into running the family and this business of getting ready to move, so that I'll forget him, but I can't do that."

"Did you ever tell your husband?"

"About Michael? Of course not—how could I? He's never had the slightest suspicion, and it's better that he doesn't. What good would it do for him to know when there isn't any need, Martha? That's why I'm talking to you about it here, and you can know just how things

stand. I don't want to discuss or even mention Michael to you in the house. Paul doesn't ever have to know. It's like Dr Patrick said to me—I could never expect him to understand. He'd see it just as an affair I'd had with someone, and been unfaithful to him. I don't know what he'd do—and there's no need for him to know. It's all finished—"

"All right, Anne. I understand perfectly. I'm coming to you and your family and I'll do my best for you all. I'm glad to come. Anything that happened at the hospital is over so far as I'm concerned. I shall never mention it."

She was duly installed soon afterwards, and proved to be an instant success. The children took to her, she asked them to call her by her Christian name, which made them feel grown-up. She worked tirelessly and made herself unobtrusive whenever Paul was home, so they could still have their private life. She was almost too good to be true.

The winter was a bad one, raw and damp and foggy. Christmas came and went, and it was January—a particularly unpleasant time, with no let-up in the cold and the snow showers. They were forced to stay indoors a great deal. Once the move was over and they were comfortably established, with Martha to take so much responsibility off her hands, there was considerably more time to think.

Why had there been no word at all from him? Months had gone by since they'd parted, and he could at least have sent her a Christmas card. She had sent one to him—it had seemed a harmless, formal thing to do—to the only address she had, which was the one where he'd rented a room when he went off to start his work.

One Sunday afternoon, when Paul had taken the children out for a walk, almost without knowing what she was doing she found herself lifting the telephone receiver and asking for Simon's number, which she remembered by heart. He was in.

"Why—Anne!" he said. "How very unexpected! It's so nice to hear you."

"It's good to hear you too, Simon," she said, with a rush. "I'm ringing you—because I've got to know how Michael is. I can't write to him myself. Are you still seeing him?"

"Mike? No—he stopped coming round some time before Christmas—I haven't seen him since. But I did speak to him once, quite recently."

"How was he? Did he sound all right to you?"

"He said he was—but he seemed a bit down. It could be the climate you know, Anne—this bad winter."

"Was he working still?"

"Yes—he was. At the same place, but looking for something else, he said. Can I help at all?"

"If he's moved to another job and another address, or if he doesn't want to write to me, that's all right. It's only that I must know he isn't ill again, or in any kind of trouble."

"Well—I'll tell you what. I'll go round to his room and look him up, I guess I should have done it before. If he has gone on I'll find out where."

Martha came into the room where the 'phone was. She hesitated, realized that Anne was only saying goodbye preparatory to ringing off, so came on in and went over to the bookcase, where she stood with her back turned, studying the covers.

Anne put down the receiver with a feeling of guilt, and stood in silence, watching Martha's back. She pulled at her lower lip, then burst out:

"I was only talking to his friend. It wasn't to him—I'm not trying to contact him directly. I was only talking to his friend—What harm can there be in that?"

Martha turned round in surprise. She stared, but only said calmly, "Will it be all right if I take this book with me to read?"

"What—oh, of course it will," she felt very foolish. "I'm sorry, Martha. I'm worried—"

"They'll all be coming back in a few minutes," Martha ignored her agitation, "and starving for their teas. I'm just going to get it ready. And with all this slush about I'll bet they'll have got their feet wet. If they have I'll make sure they change their socks."

Two mornings later, when Anne picked up the letters from the mat, there was one for her with the familiar handwriting on the envelope. She stuffed it into the pocket of the housecoat she was wearing, before taking the rest into the dining-room where she and Paul were having breakfast.

When she was at last able to be alone, she went into her bedroom, slit the flap with a shaky hand, and took out his letter.

It was short, on one piece of notepaper, and it began without any salutation:

I told you I would write to you just once. This is the once. Once is all I need—although words in a letter can't convey the depths of the hatred I feel for you now. You, and everything you stand for just by being 'white'.

I hate you for withholding from me the right of every man to live decently and bring up his children with some kind of respect for themselves and their fellow men. For the constant hounding and abuse and humiliation it is considered fair game to mete out to me. For the assumption I get from you all that, as a white woman, you may keep company with every kind of fool or drunkard, habitual criminal or potential murderer—that doesn't matter. What you must never, never do is to step ever so slightly over the line which separates them from me, who has committed the far greater sin of being born with a coloured skin. If you do, then you let slip that holy status you share with all of them.

That's really everything I've got or want to say to you. It seems you've been concerned for my welfare. Don't bother. I don't want your scorn at my failure, or your sanctimonious interest in what happens to me.

Next door in the nursery Debbie was scolding her doll. Martha was coming up the stairs in a thick winter coat and scarf, after delivering the boys safely to school. She saw Anne through the bedroom door.

"What on earth's the matter? Don't you feel well? You're looking terrible."

Anne handed her the letter.

"Poor man," Martha said, feelingly, when she had finished reading it. "I do hope he gets over it."

"He won't unless I help him, Martha."

"Anne," Martha shut the door so that Debbie wouldn't hear their voices, and said firmly, "you can't. There's nothing whatever that you can do. Get that straight. He doesn't want to have anything to do with you. He's said so."

"He doesn't mean that. He does want me. He needs me."

"He needs expert treatment. He must go to a doctor or a hospital."

"They can't help him like I can."

"Anne," earnestly Martha sat down beside her on the bed, looking troubled, "you've got to think very clearly and carefully what you're doing before you take any action at all over this."

"He has no one but me. He's so lonely. There's nobody close enough to care. He's coloured—so they won't accept him. That's a shattering thing."

"It's also absolute nonsense for the most part. It must be."

"Perhaps it is. He's oversensitive enough to be exaggerating ordinary slights and rebuffs and getting his great big chip back on his shoulder again. I don't know if

that's what it really is—I don't care. I only know it's Michael who's desperately ill—he must be to write to me like this. It doesn't matter how much he abuses me—he wouldn't do it unless he was ill. I've got to get to him and talk to him."

"Anne—stop it."

"I can make him remember that it doesn't matter how other people behave—it's his own self-respect that's important. I can help him to get that back. I'm so afraid that if he gets really bad again like he was before, he'll lose the only job he could find, and be right back where he started—with nothing, and no chance of getting his children over here. They'd make so much difference to him, Martha—I've been hoping he would be able to send for them quite soon. I have to tell him to hang on to the job until something better comes along—because it is a job, it's work he can do well, he's keeping his hand in. Someone must realize how valuable he can be to them and give him a real chance—"

"You can talk to his friend—he will help him in that way. You simply mustn't contact him yourself—he's told you definitely he doesn't want you and you must take it he means it. If you went behind Paul's back about this you'd be asking for trouble, and I won't have any part in it. Or do you intend telling him now? To say, 'Look, there's a coloured man I used to be in love with, and he's having a bad time because he is coloured. I'm going to him where he's alone in a room in Berkshire. I'm rushing off to comfort him and bolster him up and tell him I'll stand by him—and you're not to mind.' Don't be a fool, Anne."

"I can't ignore him, Martha—that's the one certain thing I know I can't do."

She was calmer now, and determined.

"I'm never going to be completely free of him. It goes far deeper than feeling sorry for an ordinary friend who's ill. I owe him—I don't know what it is I owe to him, Martha."

It could be my sanity even. When I needed help desperately, he was there. The very first time I saw him I was frantic with terror of something—I didn't know myself what it was—and suddenly there he was, right on the pavement in front of me. I didn't see where he came from or how he got there—he just was right there. And after that he was always there—

“They told me my whole personality changed, in those days when I was ill. Perhaps it did. But if it did, he's the part associated with that personality that I can't discard altogether. Everything I am now, and all the things I have, he gave back to me. I can't shrug him off with a passing compassion and leave him to get out of this as best he can.”

Martha sighed deeply. She stood up, unbuttoned and took off her coat.

“Well—you've had my advice. There's not much more I can say—you'll just have to make up your own mind. Only—don't get tangled up again, Anne. Next time you might not come out of it so well.”

She went from the room, shutting the door quietly behind her.

Whatever Martha might say, she had to go—even if it was only just once. Even if it meant telling Paul about Michael, telling him she had to go, and trying to get him to understand.

When Paul arrived home in the evening Debbie had been put to bed and the boys were upstairs doing their homework. He went up to kiss the little girl goodnight, while Martha set the meal on the table. The pug was asleep by the fire. He came back downstairs, Martha withdrew to the kitchen, and they were alone.

"What have you been doing today?" he smiled at her.

"Oh—much the same as usual. Martha got the boys to school, I took Debbie shopping, then we fed the rabbits—"

"Why can't Pip feed his own rabbits?"

"Because there are so many of them, and they have to be separated. It runs to three levels, and he can't reach the top ones."

"So you're having to feed them—in this weather? That's quite ridiculous. He'll have to get rid of some of them."

"Yes—of course. He'll hate to have to do it—but I'll break it to him."

She lapsed into silence, hardly eating anything, feeling his eyes on her, studying her, as he seemed to do so much lately.

"Is anything the matter?"

"No—why should there be?"

"You're not eating your dinner."

"Oh." she laughed nervously. "I'm not hungry. I—we're

not getting nearly enough exercise this winter, I expect."

She took the dirty dishes through into the kitchen and came back with the coffee. She knocked over the little vase of early narcissi which Martha had bought and put on the table. The water ran over his place.

"Oh, Paul—I am clumsy. I'm sorry."

"It's all right," he mopped it up with his napkin.

She put the coffee in front of him.

"You're sure you're quite well?"

"Perfectly. I did want though—to ask you something."

"Then how about asking? It can't be so very terrible. Do you want a new hat or something?"

"I had a letter today. It was from a friend—a patient who was at the hospital the same time that I was—and who's very ill again."

He sugared his coffee with meticulous care and seemed to find fascination in the little vortex he made in the brown liquid as he stirred it hard.

"Has he gone back into the hospital?" he said.

"No—he's— How did you know it was a 'he'?"

Paul got up from the table, took his cup and saucer and went over to the fireplace, where he stood looking down at the contents of the mantelpiece.

"Because you wouldn't be as affected and jumpy as you are about a woman friend, however stricken in health she might have become."

She tried to look unflustered and to calmly pour coffee for herself, but the pot shook so violently that she gave it up.

"Why does this damn dog have to snuffle so when he's asleep?" he prodded the dog impatiently with his foot. "What was it you wanted to ask me?"

"I want to go and see how bad he is, and help him if I can."

"That's very commendable, Anne. But I don't think you mean 'ask', you mean you're telling me, don't you? You

don't usually find it necessary to ask me if you can go and see a friend."

"It was only that—I just wanted you to understand I wouldn't go rushing off for some hours unless it was important."

"Is he still in love with you?"

The room blurred a little. Paul turned round to look at her. Across the space between them she could see a tiny pulse beating away in his forehead.

"Well—is he, Anne? And don't let's have any 'I don't understand what you mean' business, eh?"

"He hates me."

He was startled out of the careful grip he'd got on himself.

"He—does what?"

"At the moment he's hating me, Paul."

She was glad the light from the dining-table was soft enough to make it difficult for him to see her face plainly.

"It's all bound up with his illness. He's hating everyone. Everyone white, that is."

He stared, really astonished, at her.

"Everyone—white? What do you mean by that? Isn't he white?"

"No."

The controlled, masterful handling he'd had half-prepared, ready for a situation such as this, broke down. He turned back to the mantelpiece. The cup rattled in the saucer as he set them down. His voice shook a little, too, when he finally said, "It seems to me it isn't going to be possible, after all, for us to go on pretending everything's just fine—you're home again, and we can cut back to three or four years ago and pick up where we left off. I thought we might. I've even been thinking that we were doing it. But now I believe there's a whole hell of a lot of things we've got to get straight if we are to go on together."

"It is wonderful to have you home—and well. You've

changed tremendously—I expect you know that—and I feel I'm different too. It's a keener sense of values—or something like that. I know I love you far more deeply and with more purpose than I did before. I thought you were loving me like that, also. Now I'm not sure that you're loving me at all."

He trod on the dog again, accidentally this time. It gave an indignant little yelp and slunk off to sit shivering up against Anne's feet.

"You went through mental hell part of the time you were at the hospital. I know that—and I went through pretty ghastly hell myself. Only my hell wasn't so much when you were really ill—but during the time when I could see you were rapidly getting better."

She sat silently watching him, aware of her fingernails biting into the hands clenched together in her lap. There was no protest or ejaculation possible—only to sit there, waiting for what he would say next.

"I knew well enough—during the last part of your stay anyway—that there was someone who was doing so much more for you than I—the outsider—had ever been able to do, and it wasn't any doctor. It was bitter enough, knowing that—but it was plain. You were still such an odd mixture of agitation and hurt and fear, yet all around you was growing a kind of glory—that only comes when you love someone very much. And I knew that someone wasn't me.

"I couldn't decide what I must do. The most important thing of all was that nothing must interfere with your complete recovery. If I stepped in and demanded that you came home, I might do that. I might set you back God only knew how much. And that would be something I'd never be able to forgive myself for. But—if I let what I could see was developing go on—was it going to end with my losing you altogether to someone else?

"Much as I hated the indecision, there seemed nothing

I could do but wait and see. Then suddenly, after saying you didn't want to come home at all, you announced that you were ready to come back for good. I hoped that meant that all the misery and torment I'd built up for myself was over nothing—or nothing serious, anyway."

He came and sat down in his place at the table opposite her, where the water, from the flower vase had now separated itself into beads on the polished top. He'd got absolute mastery of himself again.

"But the way you're acting now tells me for certain that he does still mean a great deal to you. I'm not going to ask anything about your time together at the hospital—not because I'd necessarily expect you to lie to me, but because I'd rather not know. I had no idea he was coloured of course—it doesn't seem to make much difference, anyway.

"I'm not going to share you with anyone, Anne. Perhaps you've been putting up some kind of act with me these last months at home—it didn't seem like an act, but then I was bloody short-sighted before, and I'm probably being bloody short-sighted again. You're on edge, you're worrying yourself sick the whole time about him, aren't you? You can't give your mind to anything else. Well—the way I look at it is this. I think you do owe him a lot—I, even, owe him a lot—so maybe you should go just once and satisfy yourself how he is. You're not going to relax until you have, anyway.

"But you've got to be bloody certain—if we're going to hold our marriage together—it is just the once. And if you decide that isn't enough—if it is him you want, and not me—then you needn't come back. You can stay with him, right then and there, and it's got to be a clean split. I wouldn't settle for anything less."

He got up abruptly and went from the room and up the stairs. She heard one of the boys call out to him. Then they all three came clattering down, stopped in the hall to put on coats, and Nikky came in the room with the dog's lead. He

clipped it on the pug's collar, straightened up, and smiled at Anne.

"We're just taking Sam for his walk," he said.

Then he came over, put his arms round her neck, gave her a big kiss, and added: "You mustn't worry. I'll see that Dad doesn't make us late for bed, and that Pip keeps his coat buttoned up."

Martha came in to clear the table. Her expression was powerfully disapproving, although she didn't say a word.

There had been a pale, wintry sun when she set out from home, but as her train left Reading and continued on into the Berkshire countryside, dusk came down and with it a cold curtain of sleet.

Half an hour later she was able to rub the window and make out, as the train slowed down for the station at Highfield, the rising, distinctive, ugly outline of the whole hospital, its windows lit up along its entire length. Her ward had been tucked away up there, right under the roof. There were the lawns, dank and water-logged, and the quarter-mile stretch of hospital road, its lime trees lined up like tousle-headed sentinels along one side. How strange it was to be looking at it all again, and in a way she had never looked at it before—as an unconnected observer on a passing train.

She had taken a ticket for the town, a mile or so farther on, but on impulse she stepped down to the deserted platform which served the village. Emerging directly onto the street, she ran along it through the wet until she reached the 'White Cockatoo', where she opened the door and went inside. It was empty of customers. Even the big bird wasn't in his usual place by the door. The waitress came forward at once, smiling as she recognized her.

"Good evening. It's been a very long time since you were here."

"A long time," Anne said. "Do you remember the friend who used to be with me a lot?"

"The coloured gentleman? Of course I remember both of you, madam. He came in regularly each evening until, I should think, about three weeks ago. I haven't seen him since."

"Thank you. I really only called in because there was a chance he might be here. May I use your 'phone to call a taxi?"

A garage farther on up the street sent a car for her, and they drove along the road which skirted the common, and into the town.

What kind of reception was she likely to get? It had been chancy to come like this, without making sure he would be there, but he would most probably have refused to see her if she'd let him know she was coming. Even if he didn't go straight to his room from his office, but had a meal out first, he would have to get back some time before night.

She earnestly hoped this setback in his health hadn't forced him to give up his job. He was clever with figures—a good accountant must surely always be in demand. Once he'd proved himself fit and able to hold down this post, he wouldn't have all the trouble he'd had before about getting a better one.

The pavements were crowded with splashing, hurrying homegoers, heads down against the sleet, anxious to get out of it. In the darkness and wet it was difficult to distinguish street names. The driver had to stop and inquire several times before they found the one she was looking for. Then they had to crawl against the curb, peering at numbers, before she was able to pay the man, push open one of the iron gates, cross the few yards to the front door, and feel around for a knocker.

The door yielded about two feet in response to her summons, and a woman with untidy grey hair stood up against the opening.

"Mr Colbourne? Yes, he does live here, but he's not in yet. He doesn't usually get back for another hour after this."

"It's a very bad night," Anne said. "Could I come in and wait?"

The woman's eyes ranged over her, with indifference, from head to feet.

"I suppose you might."

She opened the door the necessary extra width to enable Anne to pass through. Once inside it was all very cramped for space, because of a hideous, curly-topped mahogany bookcase which completely covered one wall of the passage. It's dusty, weary volumes didn't stand upright, but lay in untidy heaps on the shelves.

"My other boarders are in the living-room, having their supper. Mr Colbourne doesn't feed with them. Perhaps you'd better wait in his room. There's nowhere else—"

"Yes. He knows me. I really don't think he'll mind."

The landlady squeezed her way to the bottom of the narrow staircase. A smell of cabbage water followed them up the worn carpet to a half-landing, where there was a horsehair sofa with its wiry entrails swelling from head and seat, successfully dispelling all suggestion of comfort. A door panelled with diamond shapes in coloured glass stood open, revealing a cluttered bathroom with a string of wet, grey-white towels over the bath. A man came hurrying out of an adjoining door, still buttoning himself up. He pressed back against the wall to give them sufficient room to pass.

The woman indicated a door bearing the number five, then retreated back down the stairs and left her to push it open and go in alone.

The room was very small, though clean, the bed neatly made, his dark blue robe folded across the foot. There was a dressing-chest with a mirror, a threadbare rug on the varnished floorboards, a wooden chair and an armchair of sorts drawn up to a minute, cold gas-fire. A curtain across a corner did as a wardrobe, and there were a couple of

shelves for books, but except for two or three paperbacks they were quite bare.

She pondered on this. Mike had no use for possessions as a rule—all he really valued in that way were his pen and his collection of classics and text books which he'd been allowed to store in a boxroom at the hospital. He'd got them out ready to bring with him here, and she'd helped him to pack them. There wasn't a sign of them now.

On the chest stood a framed photograph of his two children, the little dark-skinned girl with her arm round her smaller, fair-haired brother. She picked it up. Tucked into the frame with them was a full-length picture of herself, which she'd given him when they'd parted. It had been scored across and across with heavy strokes from a pen, until only her face was left unmarked.

She put a match to the fire, setting the inadequate blue flame leaping across the broken segments. Then she drew the curtains over the window, and sat in the armchair to wait. Except for the hissing gas and icy rain beating against the glass, it was quiet in the room, but from the floor below there rose up a murmur of men's voices and an occasional shout of laughter. Later the talking stopped and it was a television programme she could faintly hear, with more outbreaks of hooting from the men.

Quite a full hour went by before the sound of the front door being opened and closed came up to her. Footsteps started on the stairs, and she knew it was he.

She hoped the woman would waylay him, warning him of her presence and saving him from being placed at an unfair disadvantage, but no one called and the footsteps came steadily on. She stood up to face the door.

On his face, first of all, there was the mild surprise of a person who opens a door into a room he expects to be in darkness, and finds the light already on. Then a whole range of emotions played across it at sight of her. All he said was, simply, "Good God! "

He looked quite terrible. He had on only a shirt and a thin, cashmere sweater with his trousers—no coat of any kind—and they were sodden. He was considerably thinner, even than before, and the heavy brown eyes were sunken and expressionless once the first shock of seeing her had passed.

"Where's your coat, Michael?"

They stopped staring at each other. He didn't answer her question, but sat down on the edge of the bed and started to pull the sweater over his head. He was shivering badly.

She drew aside the curtain across the corner, to find only one suit behind it.

"Why aren't you wearing your coat, Mike?"

She went to him to undo the buttons on his shirt, which clung in cold black patches to his skin. Her fingers had difficulty in manipulating the stiff fabric. He didn't make any attempt either to assist or to stop her. He didn't seem to have enough spirit left in him to do anything for himself.

"I put it down somewhere," he said, lifelessly. "I can't remember where it was now. It doesn't matter."

"Did you leave it behind at the office?"

"No, I didn't," he said, shortly.

She knew then that, as far as he was concerned, there wasn't an office any more.

She pulled his arms free of the shirt, fetched a towel and put it round his shoulders, rubbing vigorously to get some warmth back into him. Again he made no protest, but let her handle him as she would a child. He put on his pyjamas and his robe, but refused to get into bed.

"Please go now," he said then. "I can manage for myself. Please go and leave me alone."

She made him sit by the fire with a blanket round him. He was still shivering, but at least he was dry.

"Where is your door key?" she asked. "I want to go out and fetch something. I'll get back as soon as I can."

The key she found in his trousers pocket. She put on her

raincoat and the hood over her head, and went down the stairs and into the street. She ran past the houses towards where a glow of light showed the shops to be. The office she was looking for was in the first block. She bought some brandy and hurried back to the room.

He was still sitting, exhausted, just as she had left him. She poured a little of the brandy into the beaker which held his toothbrush. It seemed to warm and do him some good. She sat on the floor beside the chair and waited.

"You may not believe what I say," he began slowly, at last, "but I was going to write to you again tonight. I was going to say it was unpardonable of me to send such a letter to you, of all people. I'm sorry I did that now."

She put her hand on his and spoke brightly. "When did you last eat?"

"Eat? I don't know—yesterday, maybe. What's that got to do with it?"

"I was thinking that now you're warmer and feeling better we might go and have something. I'm hungry myself. The 'Cockatoo' was quite empty when I came by. I looked in to see if you were there. We can 'phone for a taxi to take us."

He scowled.

"Oh God—do I have to explain in so many words? I haven't got any money to buy you a meal, let alone run to a taxi."

"This is no time to fuss about who's going to pay. I really do need some food myself. When we've eaten we can come back here and talk."

She found a dry shirt in a drawer and took down the suit from behind the curtain. Again he didn't attempt to go on arguing, but got dressed at once. He bent to turn off the fire.

"Leave it," she said. "Let it warm the room for when we get back."

They used the 'phone on the bookcase in the hall, and

within ten minutes a taxi had pulled up outside. Business at the café was still slack, because of the dreadful night. The waitress hovered attentively, and it was impossible to talk privately there. He was obviously very hungry, and the hot soup and the steak which followed did a lot for him, so that when they got back to his room he seemed very much revived. This time she sat in the armchair, he on the floor, leaning his back against the end of the bed.

"I wish," he said, immediately, "I hadn't let you do that, after all. Buy me a meal, I mean. I feel quite low enough as it is."

"Stop it, Mike," she chided him. "You can't really think that's important. We know each other too well to have to bother about such a little thing."

"'A little thing' to you and 'a little thing' to me have basically different meanings. And because I apologized for sending the letter doesn't signify I've changed my mind about anything I said in it."

He rested his head against the bed and went on quite without spirit, defeatedly, "You'll never in your whole life have the smallest conception of what it means to be born like me. Out of all us nine children, only I and one of my brothers were coloured. When we were little it didn't matter. Later I used to fight against it—all I knew how. I would lock myself up in my room for hours—fighting it. But I thought I had it licked. You know that I did. I thought I could take anything anyone could say or do to me—Never bring myself down to their level by retaliating or even by losing my temper—like I used to do so easily once upon a time. I wasn't asked whether I wanted to be born coloured—"

The gas jets in the fire spluttered, popped and gave up. He nodded towards a tin box on the mantelpiece where he kept shilling pieces in readiness, and she reached for it, but it was empty. She felt in her purse, found a coin of her own, and put it in the meter.

"And I was first-class fool enough to believe, after I'd come here and been treated so well and made fit again, that racial origin wasn't going to matter. I'd lulled myself into the belief that what rated higher was a man's ability to carry out work he'd trained and equipped himself for. So he could justifiably claim some place in society."

She struck the match to bring back the jerky, comforting flame into the fire again.

"Now I know better—how wrong I was, about all that. It's chronic self-pity if you like—I'm up to my eyebrows in it. But it comes from so many unhappy experiences these past few months."

"Just tell me, Mike. Did you lose the job you had—or did you give it up?"

"I gave it up."

"Oh Michael! It was always so important that you should hold on to it—"

"I gave it up."

His voice was much stronger, slurred almost as though he had been drinking a lot, and with much of its old fierceness.

"I walked out on the bastards. They couldn't stomach me at any price, and they spared no pains to let me know it. I wasn't prepared to lick their boots. All they talked of was the pools, or the tele, or their conquests with women, or their labour disputes. That was all right, but I didn't want to join in, so I sat apart and read a book during my lunch break. They resented that I should read a book. They sneered at my choice of a newspaper. How come that I—a nigger—should think myself superior to the rest of them? It went on all the time, so I finally told them what they could do with their job, and walked out."

She looked at him, frowning a little. He raised himself to a sitting position, leaned forward and scowled darkly at her.

"You think I should have gone on taking it. Put up with

their everlasting insults and their condescension. You think I was weak—throwing up work I needed badly just because they didn't like having a coloured man among them, and let me know it. So what? Are you so strong yourself—or so high-principled? Don't you preach at me. What are you? A bloody little white princess—sitting in judgment upon me, when you don't know the first thing about all that goes on? You and that adolescent attitude of yours—"

The brandy and the food and his bitterness had restored his strength so much that he couldn't sit still any longer. He got up and paced around in the confined space of the little room.

"Since then I've been trying every way I know to find work. My experience is considerable, my qualifications are good. They can never dispute that, so the reasons I'm given each time as to why a particular job is not for me become blatant, thinly-veiled versions of the same story. They don't want a nigger around their classy offices. I can go out in their yards and porter—sure, there's plenty of that for me—but anything requiring a smattering of intellect must be left to your goddam superior white brains."

Anne sat still, letting him run himself down. He hardly seemed aware that she was there. The sweat trickled from his hairline.

"Inevitably, in the course of an interview, we come to the same question: 'Why are you applying for this job?' they ask me. I tell them why I'm applying for their job. I tell them I have myself and two children to support, and that I feel theirs is work of a kind I can do to our mutual satisfaction.

"But all the time, behind their bland smiles, I can see them thinking up the quickest way of getting rid of this darkie outsider, who has the impudence to imagine he might 'fit in'. It's been as much as I could do sometimes to stop myself from kicking their slick backsides the length of their own offices."

He leaned against the bedhead and rubbed his left hand slowly and unheedingly up and down his right arm. He looked spent, his cheeks hot and his eyes far too bright now. They focussed on her again, as he sneered, "So you see, my dear lady bountiful, you were wrong, and your doctor and your Dragon were quite right to try and shield you from pollution. I'm a primitive man, little better than a savage, unfit for your white civilization. The sooner I recognize it and debase myself accordingly, the better it's going to be for me. You can remember you once had a savage for a lover—and despise me as much as you like for daring to try and raise myself above the level of a savage. And I can go on hating you for it."

She said, "You don't hate me, Michael. I think you're awfully ill just now. Some day when you're better again, you'll know you never will be able to hate me. And you'll see everything else the right way—not twisted and warped and hopeless, as it all seems to you now."

He stared at her, while still mechanically doing the rubbing up and down of his arm with his other hand. The gas spit in the sudden quiet. He stopped the rubbing. Then he seemed completely to crumple, and came stumbling to fall on his knees beside her.

"I know," he said feverishly, "I know—I know— It's me that's wrong—" He put his hands out, clutching at her. "I've gone on right down as low as I can get—right on down and down—because of losing you as much as anything. I know that I need you now—it is only you can help me fight this—this cancerous thing all over again. I've had to do without you—I've missed you so much—I can't help myself any more—"

"You have to see a doctor, Michael darling. Promise me you won't lose any more time. Then when you're better, you must try and get the job back, or something like it, and build it up. Can't you see the terrible strain it was bound to be on you? After being sheltered for a whole year—then

work, and new responsibility and adjusting yourself to outside people, in a strange country? You won't have to go through all that again. Never mind what a few people who don't matter say to you—once you've made a success of this one it'll be so much easier to move on to something better—and then so many things will open up for you again—”

“If there had been just one person—one single person—who wanted me for something I could have taken pride in doing. It would have helped to take your place. I don't know how I can go on alone—”

She put her arms round him. He stayed tense and rigid, then great hard sobs began to shake his body, which was so thin. He pressed himself against her and she let him go on until the sobbing resolved itself into a quiet, relieving kind of crying.

“I'm sorry, darling,” he said at last, looking up at her. “I'm better again. You have whatever it is I need at all times to make me feel better.”

They sat on quietly for some while, and then she said, “Michael—I shall have to go soon. You know that, don't you. It must be getting quite late.”

“Just a few minutes more.”

He moved back, out of her arms.

“Tell me about yourself. You look well. Are you happy? Everything came right, didn't it, the way I always told you it would?”

“I'm happy, Michael. I feel I have got back at last, and I'm happy about everything. Except about you—”

“I can tell you one thing for sure,” he said, “and that is—no matter what happens to me in the future, there's always going to be a little bit of you tucked away somewhere inside.”

He got up and picked up her raincoat.

“I'll come round to the station and see you on the train.”

"No," she said, firmly. "You mustn't. You're hot—really feverish—I can tell you are. I shall worry all the more about you if you go out again tonight. Promise me you'll go straight to bed now and that you'll see a doctor tomorrow. I shall telephone some time in the day, because I must know how you are after tonight. Please go down and speak to me if you can, Michael. Then—that will have to be the very last time."

"I know."

She put on her coat and collected her other things. He tucked her scarf into her collar and pulled up the hood over her head. He kissed her in the way he used to, with one hand each side of her face. Then she was out of the room and negotiating the stairs again, with again a man—perhaps a different one, but bent upon the same errand—flattening himself against the wall to let her pass on down.

She walked through the town to the railway station, and she was deeply anxious about what was going to happen to him.

The chilly rain was still coming down. It had rained hard the afternoon they'd sat in the cricket pavilion, and he'd told her he loved her, and helped her off with her wet smock. There had been a heavy shower that day on the Downs, when she'd at last given in to herself about loving him. It was pouring down now—the night she was saying goodbye to him for always.

She was in time for the last train, with a wait of ten minutes. There were a few other passengers, well wrapped up and huddling against any available shelter. The seats in the waiting-room were all taken—patient, blank, white faces turning towards her when she looked in, then sinking back into obedient immobility—and it was smelly and damp in there. She preferred to wait alone at the far end of the platform.

Most distressing of all was her knowledge that really she had been able to do nothing for him. After he'd raised her

right up and given her back so much when no one else had been able to do it, all she'd given him in return just now were platitudes and an admonition to go to bed and call in a doctor. The responsibility of broken faith weighed very heavily. Why could she not do more to help him? What was going to happen to him, alone as he was—so alone—

And suddenly she felt agonizingly alone and desolate herself—and with the loneliness starting up of fear—of the old sensation of an overwhelming panic against something unknown, rising inexorably up out of this night of bleakness and dark, of insufficiency and desertion. She looked round her. Except for the vague bodies collected down at the other end, she was quite alone on this platform, and she could feel herself becoming uncontrollably frightened.

She turned her face up to let the icy rain beat upon it. The palms of her hands inside her gloves were sticky. She tried to take deep, regular breaths, but the pain was back in her chest, stifling her attempts to breathe at all. And the train was getting nearer—in a few minutes it was going to appear, to come tearing into the station, to bear right down on her where she couldn't get away—and she'd have to see it coming—

She went as far back from the edge of the platform as she could, but it wasn't very wide. On the opposite side of the line garish, gigantic posters were plastered on hoardings. They bared themselves to the driving sleet, faces which were getting loose from their bounds, letters which she couldn't arrange into any pattern and make sense of.

She felt the desolation. God—oh God—don't let me give way. Let me be strong and let me be normal like everybody else, and let me not mind when I see this train coming at me— Don't let this be the one I've always known would come—

It was approaching, still invisible, but blasting a warning to let them know it had passed under the bridge on the common and was almost with them—they had so little

longer to be patient and to wait. She looked again for security—anywhere to hide herself until it had come safely to rest—but there was nowhere. She couldn't get away. She must stand and wait and watch—

The dark figure of a man came at a run through the barrier and onto the platform. It hesitated, then started along towards her with a queer, unbalanced kind of gait, making as much haste as it could, yet with a way of running as though it was having difficulty in making both legs function properly—was having to drag one of them along behind the other. The train came on—roaring somewhere behind the man's back—

She felt iron railings under her hand and clung on to them. The figure got nearer. It looked thin and not properly protected against the wicked night. It stopped opposite her, bent almost double, unable to make the last few yards across the width of the platform.

“Anne—”

He shouted hoarsely to make his voice heard against the weather and the train.

“Anne—I had to come after you—”

“Go back,” she yelled. “You shouldn't be out— Go back—”

“I have to make you understand,” he shouted, his face twisted in anguish, the magnified, monster faces on the hoardings backing up behind his own. “If I never see you again I have to make you understand. It's not that I'm weak—I couldn't tell you about it— Why I couldn't take you with me—”

“You mustn't, Michael. You're ill— You mustn't stay here— Go back—to bed—”

“Listen.” He supported himself against a post which held up the canopy over the platform. “You placed so much importance on the job— It was my chance, you said— I'd been a good accountant before— Remember I told you that? I could be one again—”

The train had appeared at the far end of the station. It was running in smoothly against the platform, approaching—but slower now—

"It was a bakehouse, Anne. A bakehouse— You understand? I couldn't tell you that— I never saw a ledger the whole of my time there—"

"Go back," she shrieked, "It doesn't matter— Get back—get back—"

"I used—to scour out the ovens— That was my work— Unloaded the flour from the vans—I swept—always sweeping—sweeping—always sweeping—at the floors. I had a sack over my head. I couldn't go on—prostituting myself—Anne."

She was clinging to the railings still, while he shouted at her across the width of the platform, but the unfathomable terror within herself had all gone. He was here—and what was left now was a great fear for him.

He tried to take the few paces it needed for him to cross the small distance between them, but one leg wouldn't move at all. He collapsed against the post, clasping at the leg, falling helplessly towards the edge of the platform.

She did move then—very swiftly—as rapidly as she could to get to him. Here were the wheels—she could see them plainly—mere yards from her face. She had a wild moment of wondering why there was no screaming or shouting—no additional noise which catastrophe might be expected to bring to a station platform— Why there was still only the swirling wind and the beating sleet to be heard—and the train noise, as it caught up with them.

She had got hold of him, as he was falling, and she wasn't going to let him go. . . .

For a full half-minute she lay looking into the orange night-lamp, and the rest of the room was in darkness.

But it was in the wrong place—the lamp was fixed to

the opposite wall, when it should have been high up near the ceiling. And she wondered why it was all so quiet. Mary, Phyllis, Marion and all the others would be sleeping, but they didn't usually sleep so soundlessly.

Then she remembered and sat up, to find she wasn't in the ward at all, but in a small room with just one bed. The door was half open.

At her movement it opened fully, and Sister George came through it.

She stared to see Sister George.

"Why am I here?" she said. "You can't bring me back here. I'm never coming back to this place."

"You don't have to," the Sister came to her, smiling. "It just happened that I was on the train, coming on duty, and I had you brought here. You're all right. But you had a bad shock, and you were unconscious."

"Yes."

She remembered more.

"What time is it?"

"It's after one a.m. Very late. You've been out a long time."

One o'clock in the morning. Very late. All trains would have stopped running, and she should have been back at Richmond. She felt desperately anxious.

"Paul," she said. "Paul will be thinking—I have to tell Paul I'm coming home—"

"That's all right, too. I've spoken to him. He wanted to come right away to get you, but I've persuaded him you need to stay in bed some hours."

She sank back into the pillows. She felt overheated and pushed the bedclothes back from her a little. Oddly enough, there came at the same moment the old, familiar burst of noise, like an angry express engine, in the hot-water pipes behind the bed.

"Please tell me," she said. "What did happen? How is—"

"He's been re-admitted as a patient," Sister George said.

“ He wasn’t hurt either. You held him back. He was helpless himself. He owes his life to you.”

She shut her eyes and lay quite still. There had been a great deal of turmoil, so much unrest, but now she felt able to be still.

The Sister moved to the door, to leave her. She opened her eyes to speak to the Sister.

“ Please let Paul come’as soon as he can,” she said. “ And —tell him to be sure to make Nikky understand—there’s no need to worry about me—”